☆星海社FICTIONS
フェノメノン
幽閉ファフロッキーズ
一肇
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Case 04: The hole in the clock tower

It’s dark. The air I breathe in stabs at my nostrils. I don’t know if my surroundings are narrow or spacious. In any case, I’m inside a room. It’s an ancient room that hasn’t been ventilated in years; stagnated air drifted all around me. And if you were to ask me where I was, all I could say was that I didn’t have a clue. At any rate, all of this is a blur, a vague impenetrable space where the inorganic and organic are directly connected; in other words, it's probably a dream I'm having.

That summer – even though I recall it like that, it’s barely been a month since then, we’re still in the middle of summer now, and my memories from childhood had been restored properly. You could say it was a curse, a distortion of memory that was hard to believe if you heard about it. I became aware of that thanks to the help and kindness of many people, and after straddling the line between this world and that world, I returned alive. I managed to retrieve my correct memories. Since then, I've been able to get a good night’s sleep, and I stopped dreaming - or so I thought.

“So, after a long time, it’s this kind of dream.”

I raised my voice in a whine inside the dream. I've heard that people usually dream, no matter how many times they say they don't dream. It’s just that they don’t remember, which could mean that I might have been dreaming as usual all this time. It had been a long time since I felt this feeling: the realization that I was inside a dream.

It was cold and pitch dark; I couldn’t see anything at all. I felt I was enclosed by ancient wood and a large amount of dust. I touched the floor with my hands and felt a rough and stone-built texture. And, this dream was filled to the brim with a nightmare characteristic --- There was no doubt about it. Something terrible is going to happen

from now on.

“….Hey, give me a break.”

I couldn’t help but raise such a feeble point of view.

Dreams – they themselves have already become a trauma for me.

“When you dive into the world of the deep subconscious, it’s basically impossible to conclude if it’s a dream or not.”

I recalled the words of Krishna-san. But, the dream I’m having right now, was not a melding of reality and dream like the one before. My consciousness was much clearer than before. I obviously understood that this was a dream. However, even if this was just a one-off nightmare, I didn’t want to dream anymore if possible. Having to once again taste that feeling of not being able to return is so terrifying that I feel like my knees are going to collapse.

It was that moment.

From one part of the dark room, I heard a cracking sound. At the same time, I noticed it… the smell of mothballs, similar to the smell when you open an old chest of drawers, wafting through the air. I slowly turned my head, and faced that direction. Two meters ahead of me to the right side. In that darkness, someone was there.

“W….Who is it?”

I strained my eyes but, it was too dark to make out anything. That slender figure was facing away from me. They were standing stock still with their face turned towards the wall. That person wouldn’t move at all. They didn’t reply. Was it a woman, or a man? Was it a young person, or an older person? I didn’t know. Something in the shape of a human being, which could not convey any emotion, stood still.

Once more, I heard a sound.

This time, it was a heavy clanking sound, as if two metals were bashing against each other.

That moment, a light shined in from somewhere. A few meters ahead of me, I saw a light similar to that of a full moon. I felt fresh air pumping in from there. I ran. For the time being, I'd had enough of this darkness. With those thoughts, I stumbled forward and desperately moved my legs.

---What is that person standing close to the wall?

---Why am I in this kind of dream?

Even though I knew it was a dream, but the events of the past amplified the fear in me. At any rate, my mind was blank -- without thinking anything, I ran towards that light. Beyond the hole, I saw a blue sky. The air was so clear and thick with oxygen that it was hard to believe how good it was, and as I drew closer, it was like I had just finished an underwater dive. In spite of all that, I took a glance behind me.

Before I knew it, the person close to the wall was looking my way.

That face was contorted with delight, and there was a pleasure in it, like things were going the way they planned. It was, maybe, a fraction of a second. The moment I perceived that distorted emotion, I was attacked with an incomprehensibly deep regret. But that didn't stop my body from moving, and I kept rushing ahead into that round hole that gave me a glimpse of fresh air and the outside world. If I shouted there, I could call someone, I thought to myself. I could call someone who could help me get out of here. I rushed ahead with that hope.

The moment I felt the hard, cold feel of the mud wall around my neck --- I knew what the true nature of that regret was.

I heard something sliding down with a vigorous crunching sound.

My head was chopped clean off, together with my consciousness.

"…Ughoooooh!!!!"

I woke up from my dream with a groan.

I took a deep, long breath, realizing my body was soaking wet. My heart was still beating so hard, I could hear it clearly. Repeating my deep breaths, I removed the vestiges of the dream still clinging to my consciousness. Then, the carefree announcement of the train conductor reached my ears. He repeated in a nasal voice, "Arriving at Odawara soon".

In my ears, in my consciousness, the hustle and bustle returned. It was the middle of the summer, the merry voices of children, and a salary man-like voice brazenly using his cell-phone inside the train. I opened and closed my sweaty palms a few times, and looked around. I was on a bullet-train bound for Tokyo.

"Calm down, It was a dream… Just a nightmare. It was different from that dream." Shaking my head, I muttered to myself.

The glistening sun poured into the landscape flowing outside the window. In the distant horizon, a giant column of clouds rose up. Even though the air conditioner was working inside the train, the unrelenting heat from outside the window kept pouring inside.

It was the last half of August.

I was on the bullet train headed back towards Tokyo.

"I guess I read a little too much of 'Ikaigabuchi' yesterday."

I had decided to return to Tokyo yesterday morning.

It was in the morning after I had finished eating breakfast with my father and sister; I was drinking barley tea and watching TV. When the newscaster announced with a frown:

"In Musashino district, Tokyo, the phenomenon of fish falling from the sky has once again occurred."

---What? Surprised, I turned up the volume of the television; it seemed a large number of sardines had fallen down in Inokashira park this time. Last time it was Isaki fish in Musashisakai station if I recall correctly. I heard that was only juvenile fish. They didn't say if the sardines were juvenile fish or not, but the news was accompanied by an expert who said it may have been because of a local tornado

caused by extreme weather. Well, that makes sense from a common sense point of view, but the occult fans around the nation have a different perspective.

Impossible things falling down from the sky --- That is, what has been observed since ancient times: the supernatural phenomenon known as 『Strange Rain』 [1]. Known as an omen of a natural disaster, it was actually a famous supernatural phenomenon among us.

A few days ago, when I heard the news of the Isaki fish falling down, I thought:

---Isn't something intriguing about to begin?

Since that incident, after my memories had been changed fully, I had been keeping my distance from occult topics, but then decided to access Ikaigabuchi after a long time. The forum thread on the board that was at the top had quickly reached over a hundred replies; there was a tumultuous uproar and a heated debate over the strange rain phenomenon that had occurred in Musashino.

Ah, isn't this great? Joining an occult discussion after a long time, my heart was feeling excited. At first, I thought it was dangerous and I should cut off my access to the site, but my mind had recovered more so than I thought. I wasn't feeling that wobbly shaking in the place I stood. I didn't feel that sense of hopelessness, as if the world I believed in was falling apart. It was just a doorway to an exciting adventure into unknown territory. Hadn't I already gotten better? Didn't the foundation of my soul harden well enough already? From that point on, I started reading articles on Ikaigabuchi everyday as usual. I burned every corner of the articles in my retinas to make up for time lost. Krishna-san had been diligently updating the site every day. When I was reminded of her petite body and lovely face, my love of the occult filled my heart even more.

When I was at my parent's home, I was definitely at harmony. My old friends are kindred spirits, and even when I'm asleep, I'm served with food. But unfortunately, it's just not exciting enough. Time there just moves too slowly. Above all, I'm missing that dazzling ghost factor that I was basked in with my move to Tokyo. In the first place, it was problematic that I was taking time off my part-time job; even if I

wasn't living there my apartment still cost rent. And on top of that, I still owed my sister the rent money.

I should return to Tokyo soon.

I kept thinking that, but, it was still me after everything that had happened. I had been dithering about and not making a decision, and then this incident literally fell down again.

The Tokyo Musashino incident was a continuation of the strange rain phenomenon. I couldn't stand still any longer. In the first place, summer is supposed to be all about ghost stories. In the time I've spent here in Fujieda, there were exciting ghost stories happening on Ikaigabuchi every day. This is painful. I want to be involved. Something exciting should happen to me!

….So, I packed my bags at a speed that would have stunned my family, and the next day I jumped on the bullet train.

I arrived at Tokyo station, going straight to Mitaka. I got off and, without even stopping by at my apartment, I headed straight towards Koumei university with a souvenir in my hand, and barged into the building on the western side.

"I'm back!" With a big smile on my face, I opened the iron door; at the same time, I heard a cute scream from the inside, and saw Krishna-san fall off from her chair.

When I looked, next to the fallen Krishna-san, were two chairs; on one of them was a washtub, next to that was a side table with several empty ice cups. There were several drinks lying on the working table, besides that there were several handheld fans, and some water balloons lying on the floor.

"Huh? What were you doing, Krishna-san?"

"T-that's what I should be asking you, what are you doing here?!" Krishna-san pushed up her trademark red glasses that were about to slip off, then hastily adjusted the bottom part of her exposed one piece dress. If I were to guess from that red face—Aha! Apparently, she was enjoying the summer in a very informal outfit.

“I see, you were lying back on the chair, with your legs on the back of the other chair, and your feet soaked in the washtub?"

“S-s-shut up! Why are you here? Did you already return from Fujieda?”

“I had too much free time.” I replied with a smile and dropped the large quantity of luggage on the floor.

“F-free time?”

“Ah, this is a souvenir for you, It’s from my sister and father.” I took out the packed souvenir, before Krishna-san quickly began to spit out a torrent of abuse.

“No, I don’t need something like a souvenir. Besides that, what do you mean you had free time? Didn’t I already tell you that the free time, was meant to be extremely important for you? Altering your out of sync childhood memories is a lot more serious than you think!”

“No, I’m fine now. I can properly open the fusuma, and I also went to visit her grave, all the distortions have been completely fixed in order and taken root in my heart.”

Saying that, I stood up straight, and once again bowed to Krishna-san.

“Everything is thanks to you and the others. You have my deepest thanks.”

I really, really thought that from the bottom of my heart. Now when I think on it, for a long, long time, I felt as if I'd been dreaming about it. And because of the discrepancies in my memory, I realized I had somehow raised a ghost inside me, and became drawn to the world of the occult.

“No-no, it’s not like I really did anything.” Krishna-san was caught off guard at my deepest thanks and stammered her words.

“I only ascertained the line; there is a line in this world that people mustn’t cross. I only warned you because were about to cross it.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Eh?”

“About that, I decided to write this.” Saying that, I took a letter out of my bag. Written in a word processor, It was my application for joining the club.

“A-application?”

“Yes, it has my proper signature and has a seal attached. As of today, I’m joining the Bee research lab. No, rather than Beetnik research – I’m becoming a staff member of Ikaigabuchi!”

“N-no…. wait a minute.”

“No, I’ve already thought about it thoroughly. Even after all that, I'm still drawn to the occult. I'm fascinated by not only ghosts, but also UFOs, UMAs[2], perpetual motion machines, cursed artifacts sent through time travel, and all sorts of other wonders – Or should I say, I've come to realize that I love these mysterious phenomena.”

“Oi, Nagi-kun. You’re not liste--”

“No, please just listen to me. I don't want to be scared like that anymore either. I know what happened probably pushed my mind to its limit. No, I think it did go over the limit. I’m saying that because I understand that fear very well. But even after all that, after my mind has been properly arranged, I’m still drawn to the paranormal. I found myself trying to peer into the deep and unfathomable world. And that scares me. I know that there is a part of this world that I shouldn't be involved in, and yet the fool in me still tries to get involved. They say that you have to die to be cured of stupidity, but if that's really the case, then I'm going to have to die. But, my life is a precious thing given to me by my parents, so I can’t die that easily. Then, what should I do? I thought desperately and found this answer.”

Saying that, I handed Krishna-san the white piece of paper.

“In short, It would be best for me to be next to Krishna-san!”

“….”

“For example, you know that occult topic about the moon being artificially built, right? About the moon being in fact, built by aliens as a monitoring satellite for earth, its insides being hollow, the dark side of the moon hidden from earth’s view having a landing base for UFOs -- that kind of exciting rumor. Now, I know you're raising your eyebrows in disapproval at me, but just listen to me for a second. There's no way for us ordinary people to verify that no matter what we do, right? That’s right. We can’t verify it, and that’s why our imaginations are stimulated, and we get excited. But say, I win some kind of fortune and gain some authority, and I charter a rocket to go to the moon. Then I’d look around every nook and cranny. As a result, what if it turns out that the moon was not actually created by aliens, but was a relic of a very advanced civilization of prehistoric humans? Yes, it’s 65.5 million years in the past. If I found out that the descendants of a small number of moon-dwelling, super-ancient humans who survived that "K-T boundary", where an asteroid struck the Yucatan peninsula in the Cretaceous period and wiped out nearly all life, the descendants of the super-ancient humans who live on the moon are the ones in the UFOs that are often spotted around the world. I’d probably shout in surprise, but at the same time, I’d certainly feel lonely. The hope that there may be intelligent life beyond this distant, vast universe, and the idea that they might have come all the way to earth, overcoming the dizzying infinity of space, would be shattered. I think I’d also feel disappointed, knowing that it’s impossible to go to the outer galaxy, after all. Ah, if that's all there was to it, it would have been okay. But say, you’re at your home, and before you knew it, there would be foreigners dressed in black wandering around your house, and the next thing you knew, you’d be kidnapped, and those people would be Americans or Russian agents in collusion with these super-ancient humans, and then they’d be like ‘hahaha, you’ve learned a bit too much’, and then you'd be brainwashed, or secretly buried somewhere deep in the ground, or electronically disassembled by some bizarre device, what would you do? I'm sure my final thoughts before death would be: Ah, how lucky I was to be able to fantasize about the mysteries of this world! Why didn’t I realize the greatness of having the courage to stop there? As the scenery would fade in front of my eyes, I’d surely lament that. And then surely….surely at the end I’d recall Krishna-san’s face. That

person warned me of all sorts of things. If you peek from this side, you will end up being seen from the other side -- I was admonished over and over again. That was correct, I'd say with a single tear dropping down --- Ah, I'm sorry, I got a bit too empathetic with myself and shed a tear ---- uhhh, in short, that's how it is. Krishna-san knows that the world of the dead is always around the corner. Even though you're concerned about that, you're still probing the boundary line as a living person while also maintaining control of yourself. You make sure not to step into a place that shouldn't be stepped into. Didn't you once tell me that it couldn't be helped that I had an interest? That wanting to know is one of the best qualities of a person. But for me, that quality was dangerous, and yet I still wanted to know, and I don't know why anymore. That's why… I thought I would try to be by your side. I will stay away from anything you deem as dangerous. I won't look at the things you say not to look at; I won't read the things you tell me not to read. So, it's fine if you just let me help you with whatever I can. If I leave your side, I'd end up messing with things I shouldn't have messed with. In order to not do that --- this is the only thing I can do!"

The next thing I knew, the petite occult manager's face lay near before my eyes. With our noses almost touching, Krishna was just staring at me with her cute, half-open mouth.

--Am I, an idiot?

I suppose so, but these thoughts were also words that I had already asked myself time and time again in my head. When I lived in Fujieda for a month, when I became determined to return to Tokyo and left my home, when I was headed to Shizouka station, when I was riding the bullet train, when I was headed to Mitaka from Tokyo station, and finally, the twenty minutes I spent walking from the station to this club room. So I thought, and thought, and thought, and finally spat out these words. Certainly, my fervent speech was hotter than the air coming in from the window, though, they might also have been fervent enough to melt iron.

After a while--

Krishna-san cleared her throat, and silently whispered:

“In the first place, do you have an interest in Beatnik literature?”

“What?”

“Ostensibly, this is a place to research Beatnik literature. After mastering that topic, I run Ikaigabuchi as a hobby. If you're going to join this club, you're still going to have to learn about beatnik.”

Krishna-san then started shoving old books in my hand from a cabinet.

“I'd tell you to read from Herbert Hankle first of all, but you should read these before next week.”

It was the collected works from authors who represented the Beatnik generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac.

“I…I have to read all of these?”

“That’s obvious, there’s more material to read as well.”

I flipped through the flimsy, yellowed pages, and felt dejected. They were all really thick and the letters were small.

Damn --- I saw Krishna-san’s slender figure rummaging through the cabinets looking for more books to give me.

“W…Wait a minute? In other words, are you giving me permission to join?”

Krishna-san pushed up her glasses with her middle finger as she replied.

“It can’t be helped, right? The director doesn’t have the authority to turn down someone who wants to join the club, and I know well enough that the people who like this genre aren’t the type who would listen.”

She looks at me coldly and adds:

“That’s right, a fool like you who excels at delusions without knowing your place, it’s better for you to remain within my sight, or else I’d be

troubled.”

“Then, then – does that mean I can help you with posting updates on Ikaigabuchi?”

I asked with my eyes glittering excitedly.

“No, there’s a condition for that.” Krishna-san abruptly raised one finger. “You must never look at anything unless I tell you it’s ok to look at.”

“Of course.”

“You must immediately inform me if you notice anything remotely strange.”

“That helps me too.”

“And – this one is the problem.”

Krishna-san looked at me after a pause. She glared at me with her big eyes, and opened her mouth as if she had decided.

“Don’t associate with Yoishi Mitsurugi anymore.”

“…With Yoishi?”

“That’s right; you’re not in contact with her, right?”

“No, no… not since then.”

It was that day, when I said farewell to her at Tokyo station. I didn’t know any way to contact her in the first place. I didn’t know her phone number, or her email, or her address. The only thing I remember is, her being a first-year in high school.

“Then it’s fine. Before, I irresponsibly told you that if you wanted to associate with her, you should put your whole life into it -- I take that back. When you officially become a member of the club, the safety of the club member will be the responsible of the club director.”

“Yes.”

“There’s no doubt about it, she sees ghosts. We stand in a different place than her. When you associate with her, you are inevitably involved with the affairs of the world beyond. And that is definitely---“

With her large eyes, Krishna-san looked at me and declared.

“---Not a world you or I can deal with.”

◯

Yoishi Mitsurugi, the high school girl with long jet black hair, skin as white as pottery, possessing beauty akin to a western doll. A girl with the bizarre quality of responding to all kinds of monstrosities and amplifying their horror. What you would call a denpa[3] in terms of internet slang. Suddenly spreading her crazy occult delusions into the world, causing problems for those around her -- she’s that kind of denpa.

I associated with her, I tasted bottomless fear, but as a result, I was able to confirm the correct place where I should stand. Her powers of concentration are not normal when it comes to the occult, to the point of being left speechless, however, if she hadn’t been close to me at that time, I would have stayed held down, swallowed by that deep darkness, unable to return back.

At the same time, I could understand Krishna-san’s concerns.

She is, in one way or the other, extraordinary in many terms. She doesn’t know how to adjust; neither can she read the situation like a normal person could. Generally speaking, her own curiosity is the foremost priority, and she holds no care nor concern for other people’s feelings. Things like taboos hold the same meaning as broken down doors in front of her.

However, it was a fact that Yoishi and I hadn’t contacted each other even once since then, Come to think of it, her writings had disappeared from the bulletin board of Ikaigabuchi, which I had started browsing again recently. I went back and read all the posts from quite a while ago, so I'm sure of it. It was as if she had sunk into

the sea of the internet, and all traces of her had vanished.

“She might have stopped posting, but maybe she’s still looking at logs.” I muttered.

For the time being, I decided to return back to my apartment.

Speaking of Yoishi, I recalled her last words when I reached Tokyo station.

“Next time, if we meet again...”

She had said with a somewhat tense expression.

“I’ll become your friend.”

Those were the words spoken after the train door had closed, so I’m not sure if that’s what it was. But I really feel that those were the words she frantically uttered with her lip movements. I mean, what did she mean when she said we would become friends. You don’t become friends after declaring it out loud like that, right? Usually, you’d end up hanging out with someone after getting along with them, you go through various things with them, you feel a sense of respect for their values and spirituality, and before you know it, you’d become friends -- No, it's not even worth talking about such things so seriously. Put simply, just hanging out with someone is enough to be able to call them your friend.

Whatever it is, she’s eccentric in all sorts of ways, and she’s beyond compare in terms of her peculiarities.

After all I(without holding any grudges towards Yoishi), was fed up of the feeling of the world beyond she was dragging me into. After all, only gazing at the occult from a slight distance away was enough excitement for me.

I kept thinking thoughts like that alone as I walked, before long I was in front of my apartment building in Tokyo. The scorching sun had completely drenched my T-shirt in sweat. For the time being, I should put away my luggage, change my clothes and head over to my part-time work place for greetings – it was the moment I was at my front door.

“Hey- Nagi-kun”

I turned to face the seemingly happy face, in front of the corridor was a glamorous beauty dressed in a black camisole.

“Ah, Karasu-san. Long time no see.”

It was the self-proclaimed fortune teller, one of the seniors of Ikaigabuchi, Karasu was her handle name. Of course, I still didn’t know her real name.

“You’re back then? You seemed to have tanned pretty well.”

“Oh, the reason I’m tanned is because I’ve been helping with all sorts of things: like weeding, washing the car, wholesaling lumber. In other words, I was worked hard by my father and sister, and ended up running away.”

That's what I said, but Karasu-san wasn't even looking at me anymore. I found her crouched at my feet, she started tearing the wrapping off the paper bag containing the souvenir.

“Ah, that souvenir was for my boss….”

“Wow—this is a green tea rice dumpling with chocolate paste! Super, super, super delicious! So soft and moist! I'm so happy--! It's true what they say: the friend to have is a neighbor who has a warm countryside home.” Saying things like that, Karasu-san threw a bite in her mouth. That’s right -- this person was my neighbor, my benefactor who introduced this cheap apartment to me. With pretty black hair, age unknown, a nostalgic beauty but, she also had other peculiar idiosyncrasies; even Krishna-san couldn’t control her words or actions.

“It’s so delicious – I can’t stop – “

“Hey – Karasu-san! You’re probably way richer than me, so stop leeching off of poor students like me already.”

“So cruel! I’m not leeching! It’s so sad to see a guy eating alone, so I’m going through all the trouble of eating with you!”

“Then, at least prepare your own meals. Isn’t coming to a person’s house with just a bowl strange enough? In the first place, your house isn’t here, isn’t it located in the high-rise apartment complex with a huge terrace in front of the station? The apartment next door is nothing more than a meaningless storage space for you, so please don't come to my place this often. Besides that, it’s a nuisance for you to be wandering around this neighborhood in that getup of yours.”

I said, pointing to the camisole that was revealing part of her plump white breasts.

“Oh? So you’re embarrassed? There’s no need for that, don’t act no reserved. It’s not as if I want to fool around with a fresh bumpkin boy who ran away from the sticks.” Karasu-san laughed in a foolish way as she clapped me on the shoulders.

“But you know—“, the black haired fortune teller spoke, as soon as she had finished gobbling down three more dumplings. “Even though I said you ran away from there, the real reason is that, right? You got curious about the strange rain and rushed back here, right?”

“…….”

I became silent after being seen through so easily; Karasu-san smirked.

“We have similar interests, after all; you don't have to be a fortune teller to know that. Say—that is quite interesting, isn’t it? Right now Ikaigabuchi is in an uproar. Me too, If I knew the place where it’s going to happen next, I’d rush right over there.”

Come to think of it, I had been so occupied with getting Krishna-san’s permission for joining the club, I forgot to ask her about the important ‘Mushashino’s consecutive strange rain incident’. I asked unintentionally, “About that strange rain incident, is there anyone who saw it happen? The scene of the fish raining down?”

“No, there was someone who uploaded a picture taken in front of the station crammed with fish, but that was after everything was over. I want to see the moment everything was raining down.”

“Eh, so there isn’t any new information or anything?”

“Presently, we don’t know anything beyond what was reported in the news. There’s very little info on the net as well, Krishna-chan might have some ideas, but, that girl doesn’t speak out until everything is clear.”

“…That’s true.”

So I guess I'll have to wait until the manager of Ikaigabuchi makes an official comment about it. Well, as I’ve officially became a staff member of the Ikaigabuchi today, I’ll be able to get the information a little sooner. As I once again recall the important position I gained today my expression loosened.

As I grinned, thinking of bragging about it to Karasu-san, she quickly gulped down her fourth dumpling and spoke:

“But, there’s a similar story at your school.”

“Huh?”

“You see, strange rain is famous for raining mummified fish and a large number of frogs, but it can also rain blood, right? So, a while ago on Ikaigabuchi, I read that that there’s a place like that in Koumei institute. Ehh... If I remember correctly… it was near the clock tower.”

--Clock tower?

--A rain of blood?

That sounds like an interesting story.

“W-where is that? That clock tower?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a student. Isn’t there one? A clock tower?”

“I’ve never seen it before. Or rather, this is the first time I'm hearing about the existence of a clock tower.”

“Hmmm…? Well, I really did read about it.”

As I looked at Karasu-san, who was tilting her head in contemplation, I once again pictured the inside of the university.

The university I was attending: Koumei private university.

Established originally as a girl's school, incorporated as a missionary school. It has a long history, dating back to the Meiji era. It's famous for the beautiful zelkova trees that lead to the main gate, and I learned after I entered the university that it was known to the public as a university for the prestigious class. All the faculties are located side by side on the campus, and with the high school attached to it, it is quite a large institute. The buildings are arranged around the old main building, with the student's hall on the east side. On the west side are the buildings of the arts and sciences faculty. Beyond that, sandwiched in between the zelkova trees, is the clubhouse building. To the north are the library, the science department building, and the multi-purpose hall. And on the far side of that is supposed to be the school sports grounds, But –

No, there's no such thing as a clock tower anywhere.

"Hmm..... Was it the clock tower that you can't open? Or maybe it was a sealed clock tower? Anyway, there's a hidden room there, and there was a creepy incident there a long time ago, so there's blood raining around the clock tower."

"Come on, try and remember it properly, Karasu-san." I urged excitedly.

"Ah---perhaps," spoke Karasu-san while licking her Daifuku-dusted fingertips. "That place, has already been classified as an S rank."

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An S rank classified haunted place.

It's a haunted place that is said to be especially dangerous on the occult website Ikaigabuchi. On Ikaigabuchi, there are usually four ranks classified from rank A to D; In fact, the S ranking does not officially exist. The rankings themselves are investigated and determined by Krishna-san and the spiritually trained experts on a

daily basis, with the main purpose of the site being to promote the separation of people and spirits, but if a place is currently dangerous, the article itself is deleted from the site as it's a place that people shouldn't know about.

--The rumored S-rank haunted place… in my university?

The information I gained from Karasu-san, greatly excited me. A huge event was happening right when I returned to Tokyo. This was one of the reasons why I wanted to become a staff member in the first place, so I could encounter such spots that I would never have known about if I had only been a lurker on the website.

But-- when I went to the club room the next day and asked Krishna-san about it, she stared at me with the most horrible look in the world, "I don't know who told you that story, but…" she said, glaring at me with a terrifying look. "There's no such thing as a clock tower on the campus, and no such article about a rain of blood that was ever published in Ikaigabuchi."

"…Ugh."

"You may get all excited by yourself, but you should know better, Nagi-kun."

Her words were cold enough to freeze a laughing baby's face; I nodded in panic.

"Generally speaking, the Fafrotskies phenomenon is not that rare and has sufficient scientific explanations to not be classified as an occult occurrence."

"Faf…What is that?

"Fall from the skies, abbreviated as the Fafrotskies phenomenon. In short, it's about the strange rain; the paranormal phenomenon in which fish, frogs, and other impossible things suddenly fall from the sky to a point on the earth's surface.

"Ah…the scientific explanation is like that, right? The tornado theory, or that one about abnormal increase in animal reproduction rates?

“You seem to know about it already. The Musashino incident is the same, if you roughly take a look at past cases worldwide; there are actually very few people who witnessed the rainfall directly. In short, it's mostly an accumulation of post-event phenomena, where there were supposedly a lot of impossible creatures in an impossible place. I said it before, didn’t I? Ninety-nine percent of ghost stories out there in the world are lies, delusions, or misunderstandings.”

“So, the cases of strange rain near Musashino are in that category?

”The temperature of the sea surface has been rising due to the abnormal weather in the past few years. The shift of the earth's axis caused by frequent earthquakes may be affecting the ecosystem. It wouldn't be surprising if there was an abnormal increase of a particular type of life in a particular place, or if it was simply a truckload of fish that collapsed.”

…Oof.

“But even so, the situation has caused such a big uproar that we can't rule out the possibility that some real ghosts might be involved – So we need to start gathering as much material as we can and investigate.”

With a thud, she handed me a large amount of A4 papers. It was so much that even as a man, I staggered when holding them - but when I looked up, there was more on the worktable in the back.

“W-what is this?”

“It’s material from the middle ages about the Fafrotskies phenomenon that was in the British Library. I asked an acquaintance over there if he could send me some materials, and this arrived today. I thought it had been digitized, but here it is. We have to translate all of this as soon as possible.”

“Translate…all of it?”

“Of course, and we can’t just upload it to Ikaigabuchi like that, we also need to add the summary, analysis and give our own opinion on it.”

“T-thanks for the hard work.” I blurted out without thinking; Krishna-san raised her eyes in disgust.

“Why are you acting like it’s somebody else’s problem? You said you would become a member of Ikaigabuchi, right? From now on, you and I are going to do it together.”

“Ehhhh?”

“Go all out, Nagi-kun. Go at it like crazy.”

As expected, Krishna said this without much effort - but when I thought of the endless work involved, I practically fainted right there.

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My life in Tokyo suddenly got a whole lot busier. Half of it was having all my free time consumed with doing translation work in my room, and the other half was my part time job. As soon as I gave my greetings at my workplace, I was told to go straight in and start my shift right away, as if I were making up for lost time. Basically, from the time I woke up in the morning until evening, I was face to face with Krishna-san, grappling with a mountain of research materials in the scorching hot club room without air conditioning, and from the time the sun went down until after midnight, I was at a stone-built Italian restaurant, smiling laboriously.

Day after day, I wiped the sweat from my face with the towel hanging around my neck, and with a thick dictionary in one hand, we both worked hard to translate the English documents. It was the first time since I studied for my entrance exams that I had to deal with such a huge number of English letters. Or rather, that time was still way easier compared to this. Roughly speaking, most of these documents were written in a literary style, occasionally the meaning of the English words used from the Middle Ages wasn’t even written in the dictionary. Some of the phrases are uniquely British, and every time I read them, my hand stopped. The bulky English-English dictionary was handier than the internet or the library. It was so difficult that even Krishna-san, a literature major, groaned, and my willpower, as an economics major, had already broken down a while ago.

--This is just impossible.

I don’t know how many times I uttered that line. It was still only around August; the summer vacation was still on. Outside the window, gigantic columns of clouds rose up in a nice pattern, and the sun shone in brightly. The city was full of girls in light dresses, and it was unbearable to spend time indoors, passing up the chance to experience all the youthful events like the beach, pools, and fireworks displays.

I thought that, but I naturally swallowed those words when I saw Krishna-san in front of me, her lovely eyebrows twisted into a frown as she scratched her head. If a girl was working this hard, a guy like me couldn’t give up so easily.

And, at the same time -- I finally realized something.

Up until now, this person has been doing all this work, all by herself. All of the extensive and in-depth articles in "Ikaigabuchi," which we, as occult fans all over the country, used to just read and enjoy, were surely the very fruit of this girl’s blood, sweat and tears.

Anyway, seeing Krishna-san raised my dipping morale, and I continued to frenetically go through the research materials. Waking up, I’d head to the club room straight away, translating diligently until evening. After that, I’d work at the Italian restaurant until late at night. I’d peel the garlic, wash the dishes and also serve as a waiter. I’d stagger home at closing time, sleep like a log, and go to the club room straight again the next day. The next day, and the day after that, repeating the same thing over and over again.

The only saving grace in all that was when I’d return home to my apartment after work, plop down on my futon, and take a peek at Ikaigabuchi on my phone. As usual, everyone there was chatting cheerfully about ghosts.

--God damn it, it's so comfortable not knowing the hardships of others.

That's what I thought, but that reflected me until now. Just a few months ago, I was just a user of the site like the rest of them. Even

though Krishna-san is busy doing translation work with me, but she still never misses posting daily updates on Ikaigabuchi. Knowing firsthand how hard it is to do, I can only groan.

As always, Yoishi's whereabouts were unknown. I had a quick look around the busy forums, but I still couldn't find her posts anywhere.

"…I probably won't meet her again, will I?"

I felt lonely as if a wind was blowing through my chest somewhere.

My summer vacation passed by in a flash.

◯

It was quite dark in there.

Was it cramped or spacious around me? I couldn't tell. However, my consciousness was unusually clear, It's a dream again, I thought. I could smell the dust and the staleness in the air. A closed space with no exit. This was the dream from the other day. I softly strained my eyes to my right side, and sensed someone standing over there facing the wall. I still had no idea who it was.

What was this dream anyway? Dreams are more or less a fragment of the scenery that you viewed sometime in reality. But I don't remember ever visiting such a place in my reality.

The moment I thought that, I suddenly felt something foreign on my shoe. I jumped back as I stepped on something squishy on the sole of my foot. However, the place I moved to also had the same squishy stuff. It was everywhere I moved my foot to. What the hell is this?

Crouching in fear, I touched that strange material with my hand and shuddered, it was the carcass of a fish. The floor was covered with countless fish carcasses, and at the same time, the rotten smell of fish decay struck my nose, making me cough violently.

---W-Why fish?

Did they appear in my dream because I was researching Fafrotskies phenomenon?

While I was in a panic, I heard another clattering sound somewhere. A few meters ahead of me, Light like a full moon peeked out. Anyway, I don't care where, as long as I can get away from this rotten air. Anywhere is fine as long as I can get away from this creepy place. With that thought in mind, I stumbled through the fish carcasses, covering my mouth and nose, and I started running again. The moment I poked my face out of that round hole, I breathed fresh air into the bottom of my lungs as much as I could, and felt relieved – then I suddenly remembered.

Back then, there was someone alongside the wall, laughing.

Laughing, as if things were happening exactly how they expected, and that delight showed in that laughter, I heard a swishing sound.

--Ah, it’s happening again.

My head was chopped off at full force.

I'm told that a severed head remains conscious for only a few seconds before oxygen runs out from the brain.

Maybe that's why - I saw it. The vision from my falling head, I saw countless somethings, and heard countless somethings.

But-

The moment I woke from the dream, I forgot most of them.

The only thing that remained with me, along with the disgusting sweat that soaked my body, was –

Someone's shrill laughter. The voice was full of malice, hearing it felt as if something disgusting was crawling up from the bottom of my stomach.

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With the advent of September, the number of students in the school increased by a lot. The university is on a long summer vacation until

the end of this month, and whether they are bored or not, the campus is filled with happy students who are enjoying their summer vacation and are tanned quite well. In the lawn, in the courtyard, in the cafeteria, everyone was dressed fashionably and laughing like they were enjoying their youth.

On the other hand, my life didn't really change. More than half the research materials still needed to be translated. I honestly don't care about Fafrotskies anymore when I see the crowd of healthy students laughing and acting boisterously. I felt miserable staying in the hot club room translating creepy events of past.

Looking up at the glittering sky, I thought to myself:

--Ah, I'm already eighteen.

When I was a kid, I thought being eighteen would be a lot different. I feel like I'm not quite the university student I imagined back then. I feel like I'm being crushed by a nagging conflict: the impatient feeling of not being sure if I should keep going the way I am now, and on the other hand, not knowing what else to do.

On one hand, I'm not sure if I want to become a fashionable student enjoying life. From the time I entered the school, I had the impression that everyone was indistinguishable from each other. It's ridiculed as a "rich kid's university" in the public, this may be because our university is a place where children from well-off families gather. And mixed within them was me, a bumpkin boy with a supposed inferiority complex. Anyway, I felt that something in this university felt strangely closed.

The students here try way too hard to be efficient. They don't try to work too hard. Anyone who tries to stand out too much is avoided. They introduce good part-time jobs to each other, enjoy mixed parties in moderation, and teach each other how to take exams for each professor based off of information passed down from the seniors.

--Ugh, What is a university supposed to be, anyway?

A place you're supposed to study, right? It's a place where you can

envision what you want to be in the future and accumulate the knowledge and skills to achieve it. Just going with the flow will mean you end up becoming nothing, you guys.

I muttered those kinds of warped thoughts to myself, even though I'm not a particularly studious student myself. In actuality, if I keep going on like this, I'm the one who's going to end up just going with the flow. They're not bad people or anything. They just generally don't try hard. They know their place well. They're enjoying their days while still being responsible in acceptable limits.

But – but, isn't that just boring? is what I end up thinking. I still don't know what the kind of person I'll be in the future. That's why, I have to be reckless. And like that, I'll go through bitter experiences, and find out what my limits are, and to sometimes go beyond those limits. I end up thinking: Is there any meaning to living a life without adventure?

--Everything ended before it even began.

Before I realized it, I had termed this university's culture like that.

And as such, the thing that was now supporting me was 'Ikaigabuchi'.

Countless fans of the occult gathered there, and countless paranormal events were recorded there. Sure, you didn't really feel that you were a part of youthful events of any kind, but even as I continue my days of frantically translating English research materials with the respectably petite administrator, I feel like I'm moving forward. Like I'm part of something – like I have something to dedicate myself to, and I guess that was the peace of mind I could escape to now.

That's why -- I didn't notice that the defensive instinct inside me had kicked in already. I had ignored the dangerous fact that I had been having a series of similar dreams in a short period of time – That night, that fact came home to roost.

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It happened late at night, when I was on the way home back from my part-time job.

In the flow of the lukewarm wind, I was pedaling my granny bike silently past a store in front of a certain train station, leaving the residential area behind me. My apartment is located behind the university, further along the park, and that day I was going along the narrow path between the university and the auxiliary high school—

--When I suddenly felt something on my cheek.

--It's raining, is it?

I stopped my bike, and looked up. There were no stars in the sky, but there were a few clouds and the sky was mostly clear.

It was a dark street sandwiched between two fences. Beyond the fence on the right-side wall was the sports ground of the university's affiliated school. On the other side of the left side wall was building number seven of the university. Building number seven belonged to the department of science; they were different from us humanities majors and had to stay late doing experiments almost every day. Even though it was so late, the school building was still lit in places.

That's why -- I thought it might have been water from the air conditioner.

A drop of water might have been carried over by the wind from an outdoor air conditioning unit from building seven somewhere.

But, I wiped my cheeks, and checked the palm of my head, and thought: 'Huh?' It was dark, so I couldn't be certain but, I felt there was some color tinged to it. I took out my phone, pointed the light at it, and at that moment – I shook in fear.

It was blood; the scarlet liquid stuck to my palm, appearing slightly diluted as it mixed in with the sweat on my face.

--W--what the hell?

Flustered, I wiped my hand on the back of my jeans and checked my surroundings once more. I looked up in all directions.

--Why did something like blood rain down?

I rubbed my face once again. It really was blood on the palm of my hand. The blood feels light, even sticky, like it's pulling a string. It definitely wasn't paint or something like that.

With bated breath, I looked up once again at the university building. There was no one in the brightly lit window of building number seven. There was no trace of anyone on the rooftop. Even if it was somebody's prank, I couldn't see any sign of the person who executed it.

On that hot, sultry summer night, something cold slipped under my feet.

It was then, that I remembered the story Karasu-san had mentioned, the story I had almost forgotten.

In Koumei institute, there's a place where it rains blood.

There's a clock tower there, and it is said to have been sealed up due to something creepy that happened in the past.

Where the hell is that?

Does it have anything to do with the 'strange rain' incident at Musashino?

But I never saw anything resembling a clock tower in this university anywhere, and Krishna-san had denied that rumor from the start. And right now, there was nothing resembling a clock tower anywhere around h—

It was at that moment.

I caught a glimpse of something behind the wall that blocked the space between the second sports ground and the road.

--What is that?

Was something like that at the sports ground before?

It was the top part of a long, narrow structure that resembled a tower.

The next thing I knew, I parked my bike there and unconsciously wandered near the fence, and outstretched my hands. I crawled up the wall and sat down, examining the structure.

“…Hah”

Feeling relieved, I let out a sigh of relief.

It was the reddish-brown roof of the gym storehouse. I'd been inside that thing before during gym class. Inside, it was just a dusty place where soccer balls, mats, and gymnastic vaulting horses are crammed together. I was only surprised because I saw only the roof part, which I was not used to seeing.

“I guess things aren’t as scary as they seem.” [4]

But when I took another look at the building from bottom to the top, I shuddered.

“…Eh?”

I hadn't noticed it up until now, but there was a withered old clock in the upper middle part of the building. A large sooty dial which was almost the same color as the wall, it had a minute hand and an hour hand. The second hand was missing, so I couldn’t immediately tell if it was working or not.

No way, it can’t be –

But, doesn't that look like a clock tower?

My blood froze in my veins, as I gazed at the long, narrow building standing deserted in semi darkness; this time another suspicion sprang to mind.

Come to think of it, didn’t Karasu-san mention something about a hidden room present in the clock tower…? Something about a creepy incident happening there in the past?

That gym storage room building was pretty long and narrow. It's as high as a two story – no, you could say, a three story building. But I already know as I’ve been there. There is no second floor. The ceiling

inside was definitely high – but still, the ceiling wasn't as tall as the height of the building. In short, there could be an entrance to a second floor somewhere. As I started to think about things like that, I began to feel that the warehouse inside was smaller than the impression I got from the outside. You could just say the outer walls were thick but, I began to increasingly feel that the gym storehouse was a creepy place.

Suddenly…

Feeling a strange gaze on me, I looked up… and noticed it.

The dial of the clock tower.

Around the number four.

There was something dark and hollow there.

At first, I thought there was something stuck to it, but it seemed to be a hole. Right between the middle of numbers three and four, there was a dark hole around the size of a human head. Seeing it sent a chill down my spine. Like I shouldn't keep looking at it, as if something was peeking out from the other side.

Could that be the fabled clock tower in the rumors? And if so, Krishna-san saying 'No such thing exists', could that have simply been because she didn't want me to get involved?

--My mind was still in rehabilitation, I had ended up coming to an extremely dangerous place.

"…This is dangerous."

The moment I had finished warning myself-

"Why is that clock always late?"

Unexpectedly hearing that voice again, I almost fell off the fence.

"In a closed space where students are supposed to be under control, there's not a single good thing about being late."

The voice was coming from just below.

On the other side of the fence, from the darkness facing the sports ground.

When I looked -- someone was there, leaning against the wall.

Wearing a white blouse, black tie—the uniform belonging to the Koumei institute. And that long dark hair, she seemed to meld in perfectly with the darkness. Her pale face was illuminated by the moonlight.

“Y-you, Are you?”

I asked timidly from the top of the fence.

“--Yoishi?”

The girl turned her pale face towards me, with an artificially cheerful expression.

There’s no doubt about it. Emotionless, bisque doll-like beauty; Eyes like glass beads. Is it just my imagination? She seems like she’s lost some weight. Or should I say, that person who has refined her gloomy aura is without a doubt -- Yoishi Mitsurugi.

Yoishi stayed silent in the darkness as she gazed her eyes toward me, eventually letting out a grunt. “It’s been twenty days, seven hours and forty-two minutes.” She muttered.

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“W…what are you doing in a place like this?”

This, is really Yoishi. Or should I say, is she alive? No, she just spouted something about it being twenty days and something in hours so she must be alive. But then, what’s up with this rotting look? Has she finally lost her mind completely? In the first place, with time and place being what they are. And on top of all that, I had

just been showered in some creepy blood. Generally speaking, I was unsure if what I was seeing was of this world. That's why, I asked her again.

"Hey, do you hear me? I asked you a question, what are you doing here at a time like this?"

Below me, Yoishi muttered a few words in response. "I've been thinking."

"….Huh?"

"I knew I couldn't find the answer no matter how much I thought about it. But even so, I had no other choice, so I kept thinking about it. But then, someone spoke to me…. I ignored them at first. But they were persistent. I replied to them. But they were still bothering me. So, I walked away to be alone--."

Yoishi then looked up to me with intense curiosity.

"So, what exactly are you doing here?"

"I was the one asking you."

Ah-Is that so, she nodded with a vacant look in her eyes as if she understood.

"The person I spoke to, was already dead."

That low whisper instantly made me cower and sent goose bumps up my spine.

"Hey! What are you going on about?"

Still feeling shocked, I jumped down to the sports ground, and stood up again, staring once again at her pale, gloomy face.

It was without a doubt, Yoishi Mitsurugi.

Her pale white face with its too-perfect proportions was frightening in its sculpted beauty, all wasted on her, and her ever so slender frame had slender arms joined to it.

The warm summer night breeze blowing across the sports ground ruffled her black hair. Without even trying to hold it down as much, she intently stayed dark, gloomy and silent. It was as if, at this very moment, summer had ended, autumn had been skipped over and the ice age had arrived. Her frozen beauty was still the same, but her uniform was so wrinkled; I imagined she had slept with it on, and her long, supposedly beautiful black hair was so coarse that I wondered how many days she hadn't washed it. Riding on the wind, a slight acrid odor drifted my way.

In short,

Yoishi Mitsurugi hadn't changed at all. She doesn't take baths. She was still living with one foot planted firmly in the world beyond. Or should I say, she's become even more ragged -- as pitiful as a stuffed doll abandoned at the wayside for many years.

"….Y-You, That's enough already!"

Maybe it was a reaction to the fact that I was scared out of my mind, or maybe I was just angry that I'd been startled suddenly in an unusual way. Even though it's our first meeting after so long, all I could feel was an irritating anger.

"Have you been eating properly at all? Did you take a bath? Have you just been wandering around creepy places since then? Around graveyards or haunted places?"

During my successive questioning, I realized something.

Come to think of it, this place itself fit the bill of a creepy place. There's a clock attached to the gym storehouse – and didn't she say something about a clock earlier?

"So, what were you going on about earlier? What were you saying about the clock being late?"

When I asked her that, she nodded in reply.

"Is that about the clock on the gym storehouse?"

"The gym storehouse?"

“That one over there.” I pointed to the old, long and narrow building I'd been staring at.

Yoishi nodded once and simply restated.

“You mean the clock tower.”

“….And?”

“That building is curious. The structure itself is strange but, the strangest thing of all is that the clock there is always late.”

“W-wait a second.”

I stopped Yoishi from rambling on endlessly and asked her.

“You -- just now, you called it a clock tower.”

“No matter how you look at it, it’s a clock tower.” Yoishi looked at me with curiosity and nodded.

Oh my God. She was dead on. The clock tower Karasu-san mentioned actually existed. And the phenomenon of blood raining down, as I just experienced earlier, was probably real too!

I spoke, “Yoishi, it’s over. Let’s just stop. Or rather, for one reason or another, it’s now forbidden for me to meet you. I can't just keep waltzing off to some creepy place with you anymore.”

“Well, it’s not as if we arranged this meeting beforehand.”

“Er, that might be true, but…”

“I was here first, and you arrived afterwards. I can't be blamed for that.”

--Ahhh! She has a comeback ready for anything I say.

“Anyway, I’m leaving. I don't know what's bothering you and I don't know how long you've been standing there, but I can give you some advice somewhere where there’s daylight. Now you go home, too.”

But it was as if Yoishi wasn’t listening to anything I was saying.

“Say, did you read the ghost story about the warp in space time?”

“…Huh?”

“It’s a story you hear often, people who go into a manhole, walk a while and exit from another place, only to find that the world slightly differs from the one they came from, or about elevators that stop by themselves on an unlit floor in the middle of the night and take you to a slightly different world when you get off. In that world, you might have a younger sister who is not supposed to exist, or a close friend who now acts like a complete stranger.”

Of course, I'm a bit of an occult enthusiast myself. I’ve read lots of stories of that kind. They’re very entertaining, I would even go far to say they’re my favorite kind. But, what does that have to do with the situation right now?

“Many of those space-time warp stories are often dismissed as discrepancies in memory ---but what if multiple worlds did in fact exist. And, if that doorway were to open somewhere in this world for some reason. It wouldn’t be strange to think that they could open in the sky.”

“C-could you be possibly talking about the strange rain phenomenon?”

Yoishi nodded in agreement.

“…No, be it multidimensions or whatever. Then, what about area around that gym storehouse…or should I say, the clock tower; what about blood raining there? Are you saying there’s a door to a multidimensional world there?”

Yoishi stared at me for a while before asking me:

“….Blood?”

“Oh, that’s right. It fell on my face a while ago. It already faded a bit, but here.”

I thrust out the palm of my hand before Yoishi. And then explained Karasu-san’s rumor to her about blood raining around a clock tower

somewhere in Koumei institute, and I told her about this blood falling down on my cheeks a little while ago. There wasn't really much trace of blood left on the palm of my hand, but a black stripe was still perceivable if you looked closely. Yoishi silently drew her face near my hand, and sniffed the scent. Is she a dog? I thought, as she finally nodded and spoke.

"I can certainly smell hemoglobins and sodium chloride."

"R-right? Why did something like blood fall down? Where did it fall down from? And—"

I looked up and froze, just as I was about to ask about the hole in the clock face I had discovered.

The hole in the clock tower dial had disappeared. Only a white board remained between the numbers three and four.

"Huh…? There was definitely a hole there just now—". The moment I said those words…

"Did you see that hole as well?"

Goosebumps crawled on my skin, at the sound of her somewhat happy voice.

When I saw, Yoishi Mitsurugi's eyes had suddenly begun to shine.

"The Fafrotskies phenomenon, the blood rain around the clock tower, the clock being late – there's an origin behind all these phenomena. But the primary factor may not be necessarily understood by humans."

While being horrified by that dark shine which had already become nostalgic, at the same time it also brought back the days of cruising the depths of the underworld with her that had already faded into the deep recesses of my memory. For the first time in a while, my whole being was now enveloped in a sense that something was slipping away. This world and the world beyond are becoming connected, a feeling I could never cope with, a feeling of despair that death was creeping in–

This was bad.

Everything would simply slip away from this point on.

No—w-wait a minute, time out! Time out!!

But…Yoishi already had her face so close to mine that I could practically feel her breath on my face.

“Say…”

“…..”

“Wouldn’t you like to go there? To the clock tower?”

--Damn it, why do things always end up like this?

Regardless of Krishna-san emphasizing the fact that I shouldn’t associate with Yoishi, yet here I am, at the dead of night, going out on another strange adventure with Yoishi.

The two of us headed towards the clock tower, the sports ground was as dark as the night sea. However, to be honest, I would strongly argue that this was out of my hands. Just like Yoishi said, we didn’t really plan to meet or anything. It was an accidental encounter, so to speak.

--I can still…turn back.

I should still be able to return to my usual peaceful world. All I had to do was immediately turn on my heels, tell Yoishi I’m really quitting, see you later, ciao, and then hop on my bike and race back to my cheap apartment. I’d forget Yoishi’s mutterings, crawl under my futon and forget everything. However, despite my internal conflict, my feet continued to simply follow in Yoishi's footsteps. At this very moment, there's some kind of creeping chill in my body that refused to disappear, but it still didn’t stop my feet.

“I've heard that building’s history dates back to before this school was founded.” Without turning back, Yoishi continued to narrate.

“Originally, this land seems to have been donated to the school by an influential local. And that building continued to be used by the school since then.”

“So, was it originally a clock tower?”

“The students in the affiliated school seemed to have called it as such.”

So that means – Krishna-san, who I’m sure graduated from the affiliated school, knew about it. Which means, that I was indirectly kept away from the paranormal. In short, that is an S-ranked haunted place that I shouldn’t be looking at.

As if to affirm that fact, Yoishi’s eyes were shining.

“That place is quite dangerous.”

…..I’m sorry, I’ll be leaving after all. By the time I had finally made up my mind to speak those words, we had already reached the clock tower.

On the front of the building was a sign that said ‘Koumei Institute Athletic Equipment Storage Area,’ and next to it, was a brightly colored cone. Dirty rugby shirts lay scattered about, there was also a cooler box forgotten by some club. However, the original foundation of the building was built from stone, on top of that was wooden construction. The wall coated with old plaster stretched out. It’s pretty worn out, yet when you look at it carefully, it’s a blending of Japanese and Western Styles, reminiscent of the early Meiji era buildings that you see in books- indeed, the outward appearance of the old clock attached to it makes it befitting enough to be called a clock tower.

While Yoishi was wandering about tampering with the edges of the foundation, I kept staring at the old worn-out clock. If you look at it from here, it’s actually attached quite high up. It was stained in white, and looked as if it had assimilated with the surrounding walls.

You wouldn’t even notice the clock with just a quick glance.

Moreover, looking at it again from up close, there surely didn’t seem to be any hole in the clock face.

I could have misjudged it from back then, but Yoishi did ask, ‘Did you see that hole as well?’ That means, Yoishi must have seen it as well… In short, what does it all mean?

“Move.”

Being ordered so suddenly, I looked to my side and there was Yoishi Mitsurugi, brandishing an iron rake used for sports ground maintenance like a great sword from a fantasy world.

“…W-woahhh!!”

As soon as I jumped out of the way in a panic, Yoishi swung downward with great force.

A sharp sound rang across the silent sports ground, and the old door bolt was easily smashed into pieces. While I stood there dumbfounded, Yoishi opened the door, and boldly entered inside. A guard might have heard that noise, I wondered as I followed fearfully. It was dark inside. Without saying a word, Yoishi took out her phone and turned on the flashlight. The light from her phone dimly illuminated the surroundings and the familiar room came into view; it was a dusty place about 27 sqm in size. Covered with mud walls, rotten air clung to the place. I don't know if it's from used gym equipment or something specific to the building. Maybe it's both.

Yoishi randomly moved aside mats and portable basketball hoops out of the way so she could see the mud walls. She muttered ‘Hmm’ as she pointed the light towards them. I don't know what it was, but I was already scared out of my mind. It wasn't so much from this place, but rather my thoughts were dominated by that idea that I had just had a while ago. The ceiling of this room was way too low compared to the height of the building.

Maybe it was because I had confirmed from close up, but that thought had begun to fill me with more and more anxiety.

“…Say, Yoishi.”

I made up my mind ask the question.

“Could this place have a second floor?”

“Of course, there is.”

“Eh?”

“Because it’s a clock tower, after all.”

Yoishi posited that because it’s a clock tower, there’s a clock, so there must be a room for its maintenance. But, the creepy feeling nesting inside me was about something else. There are no stairs leading up to that maintenance room or whatever in this building. Even if there was a second floor, the entrance itself being sealed was what scared me. But Yoishi spoke in an exasperated tone.

“That’s what we’re here to find, after all.”

After that, she stared at a thick beam about three meters above…

“There must be a way up somewhere.”

Saying those kinds of things, she began knocking here and there on the wall.

It couldn’t be helped, I took out my phone and turned on the flashlight, and started walking around, knocking on the walls nearby. When I looked at it again, the walls, the floor, just about everything was pretty antiquated. It wasn’t at the level of being completely worn-out and filthy. But still, It's such an old building that it makes me feel uneasy to be here, making me wonder if it’s used up all its years of durability. There were several layers of cobwebs in the corners, and the wooden frames of the pillars smelled as if they were rotting.

“Here.”

Eventually, I heard such a voice and turned my head to see Yoishi, without even trying to keep herself free from the dust, she moved a

worn-out, crumbling vaulting box out of the way and was tapping on the back wall.

“It's blocked in here.”

Indeed, it was the only part of the old wall that was made of brand-new mud wall. Yoishi looked over her shoulder, without hesitation, she lifted the top of the vaulting box and threw it against the wall with all her strength.

“H-hey…”

Before I could even stop her, she slammed the vaulting box against the mud wall again and again, until a crevice appeared. Furthermore, she once again brandished the iron rake she had used to break down the door from earlier and drove it into the wall, using it to forcibly widen the crevice.

“That hurt.”

Saying that, Yoishi passed under the gaping wide hole to somewhere else.

Preparing myself for the worst, I followed her. I passed under the crumbling wooden frame, when I focused the light from my cellphone, I saw a staircase spiraling upwards along the outer wall.

“Say, why do you think the entrance was sealed?” Yoishi muttered as she steadily ascended the stairs.

“To keep people like you out, obviously.” I retorted, ‘That’s not it’, replied Yoishi.

“There’s another purpose in keeping the entrance sealed. It’s to keep whatever is present inside from getting out.”

I shuddered at those words, and then I remembered.

When was it exactly? I fervently rummaged through the recesses of my memory – and I remembered.

That’s right, it was back when I was in elementary school.

One of my classmates lived in a temple, and we were all sneaking into his house at the time.

“Behind our main temple, there’s a storehouse that we’re not allowed to open. I’m sure it’s because a monster lives there.”

That kid used to brag about that in class at every opportunity, and there were no such elementary school kids who didn’t have an interest in that kind of thing. So, one day after school, we all decided to meet up around midnight and explore that storehouse. I brought my bat, that kid brought his air gun. Other guys with more extensive knowledge brought things like salt, and for some reason, one guy brought his deceased grandmother’s memorial tablet. Each of us carried our preferred protective equipment, and we snuck into the temple at night.

In the midst of the darkness, the dark storehouse stood eerily, I don’t know how many times I was about to suggest we return home. However, no one said anything, perhaps because of our pride as men. At last, the kid from the temple brought a crowbar from his house, and began to break down the sturdy padlock to the storehouse.

Eventually, the padlock fell down to the ground with a thud, and we timidly opened the door.

Taking a peep, it was pitch dark inside. Rotten air oozed out from inside. But I think all of us felt it. More so than the rotten air, there was something invisible, something evil -- it felt as if it was stroking our hands and necks. We got scared and decided to first send in a stray cat that stuck around the temple. Just bringing the cat close to that place caused it to let out a tremendous wailing sound. That sound made us lose our nerve, and eventually the kid’s father heard the commotion and came running.

It was the first time I was scolded by another person’s father.

“Things that are sealed, are sealed for a reason.”

We were scolded severely, and the kid’s father, who was the head priest of the temple, lectured us about it and chanted sutras at us in the main hall until morning. Now when I think about it, it’s a good

thing we were stopped back then. The memory of that time, the feeling of something seeping out of the storehouse, was rapidly coming back to me here on the stairs of this clock tower.

Certainly, it's just as Yoishi said, those wooden frames were just too thick to only be blocking the stairs. What would they do when they needed to repair the clock tower if it was sealed up so tightly? It was too exaggerated to just be protecting against intrusions from pranksters and the like. Every time the old wooden stairs creaked, my hunch of something bad happening worsened.

"It's here."

In the dim light up ahead, I heard Yoishi, in a somewhat lively tone of voice. Sure enough, as I reached the top of the stairs, she was waiting for me, in front of a wooden door.

"I'm going to open it, but is it alright?"

I looked at Yoishi, wondering why she would ask a question like that at this stage.

"Would you stop if I asked you to?" I retorted while forcing a smile.

"Why is the clock late? The answer to that question is probably not very pleasant." Yoishi muttered.

"Huh?"

"It's quite dangerous from this point on."

Yoishi chewed on the nails of her left hand. That seemed to be a habit of hers whenever she got excited.

"What exactly is dangerous?"

"Malice itself lies within."

Her eyes shone as she finished speaking those words.

Before I could even say, "Let's not do that then", Yoishi opened the door without hesitation, as expected.

The interior was even darker yet, filled with the pungent smell of dust.

I directed my flashlight inside: it was even smaller than the storage room below, a vacant space about 18 sqm in size. The ceiling is shaped in the same way as the conical roof, and there were old wooden chairs and an old blackboard on the wooden floor. However – there was something in that room that was creeping me out.

It was as if something was coiling around the back of my neck.

Like a creepy, slimy arm was grabbing my ankle.

This feeling, I felt like I'd experienced it somewhere very recently.

--And I suddenly remembered.

It's that dream. I had been confined in a dark, narrow place somewhere, and when I tried to escape, my neck got chopped off. The moment I recalled that, I remembered the voice of the person laughing in the dream, which I had forgotten up until now. A voice filled with joy, uttered as if everything was going according to their expectations.

Yoishi had said that malice itself lies in here.

What exactly is malice?

Why is it necessary for something like malice to reside in the clock tower in the first place?

I noticed my knees had begun to tremble, I felt like I could sense the presence of that someone from my dream, standing still right next to the wall beside me. Was that dream a premonition of the future? Was that dream about right now? Here in this room? Something would call out to me, and then just like my dream, my neck would be chopped clean off?

--Y-you've gotta be kidding me.

The moment I got cold feet and reflexively moved to run –

It was slightly two meters right of me.

I felt someone's presence, and was slowly turning my face in that direction—

"Don't look." Yoishi whispered in a silent, sharp tone. "Pretend not to notice."

Thanks to that voice, I barely managed to stop the movement of my neck.

However, at the periphery of my vision, I ended up seeing it.

Japanese clothes, I thought. A glimpse of the arms – thin, as withered branches. I knew it was looking my way. I desperately turned my face away. Then I stopped my breathing, pacified my heartbeat which was racing like it was about to explode, and I tell myself, as hard as I can:

--There's nothing there, it's just my imagination. I didn't see anything at all.

But my knees were trembling with fear. Sweat trickled down my back and under my arms.

Yoishi proceeded to the back of the room as if nothing had happened.

There, she pushed and banged on the wall.

"The clock is on the backside of this part." She muttered.

"….I-is that right?"

I'll join in the conversation. I squeezed out a shaky voice as if to show that we were the only ones present.

Soon, a metallic clanking noise echoed inside the room.

At the same time, I felt the air stream out of the room, and I saw some kind of light above Yoishi's knee. It was the light of a house far away in the distance. Right next to Yoishi, there was a hole cut out in a circle about the size of a person's face, just like the one I had just seen in that dream.

“This was the hole you saw earlier.”

Yoishi crouched down and put her hand on a rim, which was drawn back so close to the floor that I could barely see it.

“You can close it, and open it, with the lever here.”

“W-why is there such a thing there?”

Yoishi slightly tilted her neck quizzingly in response to the question.

“Maybe it’s used to adjust the hour or minute hands. Or perhaps there’s a different reason altogether. However—”

Yoishi questioned me as if she was peering into my eyes.

“Can you, look out from here?”

---Look out, from there?

No, that is…

“It’s strange, isn’t it? There’s no other place to check if the hands of the clock are moving. Having said that, it takes a lot of courage to check the minute hand from here. I mean, if you were to do it carelessly...”

Yoishi made a cutthroat gesture as she drew her fingers across her neck.

“The moment you look out, your neck might get chopped off by the clock outside.”

--Ah! Isn’t that…what happened in my dream? Didn’t my head already get chopped off twice in the dreams?

“That’s right.”

Rather than a reply to my thoughts, Yoishi said that as if she was announcing it to the entire room.

“If an ordinary person saw this hole open within this hermetically sealed, stifling room, they would generally end up looking outside.

After all, the only other window in the room lies in the ceiling far above us: a skylight that can't be opened. In short, the structure was made so that fresh air could only come through from here."

It's just as Yoishi said.

It was of a nature that I would like to call the architect's malice.

"Anyone would stick their head out of this hole, and it would always get caught by the minute hand, slowing down the clock."

Huh…?

"W…wait a minute. Whose neck got—"

"What time is it, according to your watch?"

I looked down to check my wristwatch on Yoishi's query.

It was 12:51 am.

Yoishi checked her own watch in reply and nodded.

"Mine is the same. So, the clock outside is five minutes late, which means that the minute hand is at 45 minutes or so."

I had no idea what she was going on about.

"The hole we saw outside was located between three and four. In short, if one were to look out from here right now, the minute hand wouldn't be falling down on one's neck."

"…No."

"Let's take a look."

Before I could even tell her to stop, Yoishi went down on all fours, with her back towards me, she pushed her face outside the hole towards the light.

That's when I definitely heard it.

A sound like "drrng!", seeming to ring out from the whole room,

something neatly clicked in place. For a moment, the back of her body twitched, and then eventually, Yoishi stopped moving.

“Y—Yoishi?”

Even though Yoishi’s body was there, her presence had disappeared.

It can’t be.

If the minute hand, had fallen down just now…

Then that sound just now, was Yoishi's head being chopped off by the minute hand outside.

I checked the time once more.

It was 12:52 am right now. That means there's no way the minute hand would had fallen down on Yoishi's neck.

Even though there was no way for that to happen—

I was too afraid to touch Yoishi's body, which was right there in front of me.

What if I pull her out and she has no head?

What if her decapitated head fell down on the sports ground?

In the dimness, her pale arms and ankles were covered with dust, and stretched out on the floor, like a puppet with its strings cut off.

There I was, about to scream… Doing my best to catch my breath.

Because of Yoshi... Because she was here, I was able to endure the frustration of wanting to run away up until this point.

It was because of 'Yoishi Mitsurugi', the guide who formed an ambiguous connection between the spirit world and reality, that I was able to make it this far—

I felt as if I heard someone laughter, and just when my fragile, delicate, and meager spirit was finally stretched to its very limit.

"That felt good."

I was trying my best to keep my mouth shut, and that voice reached me.

At the same time -- Yoishi Mitsurugi , who had been as motionless as a corpse, pulled her face out of the hole and stood up.

"…Y-you're.."

I couldn’t speak straight away.

Yoishi slightly tidied herself up and spoke, “Let’s go.”

With the same calm gait she displayed when we arrived, she moved towards the stairs. I rushed behind her.

Closing the door, we descended the creaky steps.

Without looking back, I arrived at the bottom as if nothing had happened, just like Yoishi.

We slipped through the broken wooden frame back to the gym storehouse. And then, we arrived outside.

I was so used to the darkness that even the dim light of the sports ground seemed bright to my eyes.

The outside was like a different world. The sky, the clouds, the greenery around the sports ground; it was like it was overflowing with a surging life force. The air felt amazingly good. I inhaled it to my lung’s full capacity, and took several deep breaths. At some point, I wiped the sweat from my brows, put my hands on my knees, and exhaled deeply on the spot.

“—What…the hell was that all about?”

After getting far enough away from the clock tower, I was finally able to speak.

“What?”

Yoishi’s white blouse dazzled as she walked in front of me.

Was the second sports ground this big? I wondered as I was suddenly attacked by dizziness.

“That second floor…no, the thing you called malice, what the hell was it?”

“For more details, I guess you'll have to ask your teacher, but I’ll say this much: That building is neither a gym storehouse, nor a clock

tower – originally, it was an earthen storehouse."

"A-an earthen storehouse?"

"That's right, the clock was installed later… it was unmistakably added after the school was built, I think."

Yoishi stopped walking around the middle of the sports ground, and turned to look back. I stopped in my tracks, but didn't dare to look back. I couldn't bring myself to look at that building again right now.

"When I was young – it was around this time of year. I visited my grandmother in the countryside, and played with my elder sister until the evening."

...What is she talking about?

Holding down her hair which fluttered in the wind, Yoishi spoke to no one in particular.

"It gets dark quickly in the countryside, and the people quickly disappear, so we took a shortcut to get back to my grandmother's house. We weaved our way through the path between people's houses."

Rather than speaking with me, Yoishi continued to whisper as if she was gazing somewhere far away.

"It was as if we'd become lost in a world of cicadas, their cries filled the air everywhere. I remember it was so loud it was almost deafening. And when we passed by the back of one of the biggest houses in the area—I heard a voice, as if mixed in with the cries of the cicadas. It was from the storehouse of that large house. A terrible scream with words that didn't form any meaning – A string of miserable, resentful, aberrant words -- I Immediately clung to my elder sister. It was an elderly voice, that of a woman. After that, a hand touched the skylight of that storehouse. A thin, pale arm. That arm suddenly grabbed the iron grill of the skylight. It was probably the hand of that old woman. After that, we heard a voice once again. Putting your mother in a place like this. I'll curse you, I'll curse you all. It was as if – that arm itself was speaking."

A pale, thin arm.

A trail along the countryside at sunset.

And horrible words from a curse.

If you experienced it when you were young, it would be intense.

“I can kind of understand now. An old woman with dementia must have lived there. The man from the house must have locked his mother up. That's the nature of an earthen storehouse. You could call it an Edo era prison cell. I've heard that noble families and wealthy merchants around the Meiji era had them. Whenever a delinquent or mentally ill member of the family appeared, they would be confined inside it. And --- that was…” Yoishi pointed towards the soaring building tower behind me. “That was originally an earthen storehouse with the characteristics of an Edo era prison cell.”[5]

I finally understood it. The thing that was standing besides me back then. The glimpse I had caught at the edge of my periphery, someone who wore an old, weathered kimono. I wondered if it was an old woman.

“That hole was likely used to insert food through, and it might have also been used to retrieve excrement. However, when I peered out of that hole, I realized… A room you could never leave. You could never leave it, and yet, you could breathe in as much fresh air as you wanted. A hole you could use to experience the air of the outside world to the point where it would drive you insane.”

“So, that’s the malice…”

I barely managed to speak out in a hoarse voice, and Yoishi nodded.

“It might have been set up by a family member to deal with an older relative who had lost their mind. They didn’t want to take care of the old person, and they don’t want them to live however long they please. It would be better off if they had died sooner in an accident – the building was filled with such thoughts.”

My God. How sad would it be? What kind of curse is a life wishing for the death of one's parent as they break down?

There's the legend of a mountain where old women are abandoned[6]. As long as people are growing old -- be it the present or the past -- I'm sure there have always been problems relating to an aging society. My grandfather and grandmother both died one day suddenly; we were all shocked, and very saddened. But I suddenly thought: Wasn't that actually a blessing-in-disguise? To be able to depart this life while still bearing the love of one's family, isn't that the greatest happiness? I reflected on such unbearable thoughts.

Presently used as a gym storehouse, referred to a clock tower, and used as an earthen storehouse in the past --- that long and narrow, dark shape. I found myself staring at it with complex feelings.

"…Huh?"

I felt a strange feeling of discomfort.

I was still overlooking something important.

"That's right." Yoishi whispered in response.

"That explanation is insufficient to explain everything about that building."

When I looked, Yoishi's eyes were wide open, and behind those glittering eyes, I thought I saw a glimpse of someone.

"The explanation for why the hole keeps opening up is insufficient. Even if you were to say it's because someone is confided there, normally, it should stay open after being opened once, there's no reason it should close again."

"Oh…."

As sweat dripped down from my cheeks to the bottom of my chin, Yoishi continued to speak.

"Malice accumulates, and becomes a contagion. A place tied down by malice, becomes a habitat for those who hold malice."

--That's right.

The first time I noticed there was a hole in the clock face, it was in the place of the number 4. Now, there's no hole there because Yoishi operated the lever when she stuck out her head. However, if that were the case – a contradiction arises.

"I wonder what you're expecting."

Leaving me with those words, Yoishi turned back, and began to walk away.

"W-wait a minute, Yoishi!"

Flustered, I chased after her, and in a trembling voice, asked her:

"A while ago, we entered the clock tower and for the first time, used the lever to open the hole, right?"

"Yes."

"Which means, there was no hole before we entered."

"True."

"Then, in the beginning, the hole in the clock face we saw from the fence…. who--?"

"That's why I told you, pretend not to notice."

Yoishi simply shrugged her shoulders.

"After all, there were two people inside."

With those words, a spectacle that I shouldn't have seen unfolded in every corner in my head.

An old woman with disheveled hair. A cloudy, unfocused gaze and a seemingly sad expression.

And, someone clinging to those thin, wire-like legs of hers. It had hollow, empty eyes; its red mouth twisted into a broad sneer. It

displayed an expression of pure delight on its face, as if everything was going well.

--Because it’s fun, after all.

I thought I heard someone’s voice in the midst of the night wind.

As I stared at Yoishi’s form fading away in the distance, I became unable to move.

I forced down my saliva, deeply regretting that I didn’t stop when I should have. And then, I heard a voice — you better stop while you can.

The world beyond had manifested right beside me. The entrance to the afterlife had opened its mouth before me, not knowing the existence of which would have let me lead a much, much happier life. I was painfully aware of that. However, I ended up aware of the fact that the entrance was there, So what should I possibly do now? Once you end up becoming aware of it, you’ll become involved. From here on – and for the rest of my life. That’s what it means to associate with Yoishi. As long as she stands in the world beyond, associating with her means getting involved with the world beyond. You'll end up knowing things you don't need to know. I should have known all these things, and yet—

I’d been through hellfire and brimstone, and I was finally able to stand on my own two feet, and yet—

The magma that made me want to cry out broke through the bottom of my heart – but, I turned to look back.

It stood still as a long and narrow shape on the sports ground.

It existed as a gym storehouse for me, a clock tower for Yoishi, and was an earthen storehouse in the past.

And, situated at number 4 of the clock face.

A hole had appeared there before I had even noticed – and something… was peeking out.

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Case 05: The Cat Mystery

As a stereotypical student living in poverty, I've developed several cost-effective dishes, but the one I've taken the most liking to is the Hundred-yen ramen. Made from cheap noodles, cheap eggs and cheap bean sprouts at the cost of a hundred yen; the aroma of pepper and sesame oil was really appetizing. It was my specialty. It's a little tricky to make in my single room apartment with a single burner stove, but once you get used to it, anyone can make it while everything is still piping hot.

I was following my usual routine that day: I did my work translating research materials on the Fafrotskies phenomenon, then I returned to my apartment to prepare a meal before leaving for my part-time job in the evening. I was sitting in front of my dining table with a steamy hot bowl, put my palms together in thanks, and was just about to take a bite when I heard a knock on the door.

I looked towards the door, and it burst open by itself, revealing the grinning face of Mitsuru Ooki.

"Yo, Nagito! There you are."

"Oh, if it isn't Ooki. What brings you here?"

"That looks delicious."

"Well, I ain't sharing."

"That's alright, I've eaten already."

Saying that, Ooki brazenly took off his shoes and entered inside. Taking the large bag off his shoulders, he flapped the T-shirt around his neck, causing his pungent body odor to waft throughout the room.

I frowned in the middle of my dinner, and glared at Ooki's blood-red face.

Mitsuru Ooki was a freshman like me, an acquaintance who I met in the western club building of the university.

It was mid-September and the university was still on summer break, but I was extremely busy spending my days in the western building translating English research materials. One day, when Krishna-san wasn't around, I had left the door fully open to allow the fresh air in, and this guy, dripping in sweat staggered in. My first impression was that he was a weirdo, but after talking to him I found out that he was also a scholarship student, and like me, one of the few poor students from the countryside at our campus, who also lived alone – From then on – the conversation went well. During the summer vacation, this guy was drawing paintings silently alone in the art club room, and when he'd get lonely, he'd come to where I was, and then I started going to the art club room as well. Soon after that he started showing up to my apartment uninvited.

Mitsuru Ooki certainly had the personality of an insolent and rude guy who was used to scrounging off of others – but this guy still had a dream of becoming an artist. Whenever I would ask him about Housui Yamamoto or Johannes Vermeer he would get so fired up that I'd get fed up listening to him. And I liked this kind of guy. In fact, I would say that meeting people like this was what I was looking for.

"So, what brings you here?" I asked him while sipping the ramen.

"You sure have a nice room, as always." Ooki spoke as he took a scrutinizing look around at my empty room.

"Is that supposed to be sarcasm?"

"No, I really do think that. The best part of this room is that there's nothing in it. Not even a TV or a computer. Just a dining table and a few books. Young men should hold pride in their poverty."

Ooki said that with a happy tone. Certainly, when I visited his apartment, it was a 7.5 sqm tatami room with nothing but oil paints.

“Well, that’s all fine and good, but do you already get why I’m here?”

Ooki smiled complacently as he asked me that. It’s annoying that this guy believes I’ll understand what he wants to say just with a smile. I’m not psychic, I won’t know unless you tell me directly.

“I’m not lending you any money.”

“I’m not so feeble minded as to ask money from you.”

Ooki then grabbed his bag, unzipped and opened it. A meow sound suddenly emanated from the inside, and I braced myself.

“I want you to take care of her for a few days.” He took out a cat as he spoke.

Moreover, it was a white cat with quite an adorable face.

“You were keeping a cat?”

“Actually, I found her about two weeks ago. Her name is Miiko.”

“What’s with that name? Anyway, It’s a problem for me. Pets aren’t allowed here.”

“It’ll be alright, it’s just for a few days. She’s well behaved and barely ever makes a sound.”

“Didn’t she meow just now?”

“It almost never happens. It was just because I’d kept her in my bag for so long, it was a meow of relief.”

“No, I can’t do it. Cats aren’t allowed.”

I spoke firmly, but the white cat had already left Ooki’s grasp, sniffed the aroma of its surroundings, before eventually her nose twitched at the bowl of ramen I was holding. After that it scrambled up to my lap in a friendly manner.

“See? She likes you already.”

Ooki spoke with a complacent smile as always. It's been a long time

since I'd felt the soft touch of a cat, and the faintly sweet smell of a beast stirred my heart.

“It’s a problem. I can’t keep a cat.”

But Ooki was acting as if he didn’t hear me.

“Actually, one of my relatives from my mother’s side passed away, so I have to go back home. I’ll probably return in two days, so I want you to take care of Miiko while I’m gone.”

Then he patted the white cat's head and smiled contently once again.

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Got it, Miiko? Remember to behave, and take good care of the house.”

The cat meowed in a quiet and lovely way at Ooki’s remarks. That face was really quite lovely. After that, I couldn’t really say anything anymore.

○

Cats.

Their bodies are soft and warm, and they’re so cute that you want to rub their cheeks when they purr in your arms. In the modern world, everyone recognizes that they are a rival for dogs as two of the most popular pet animals in the world. I'd always been a fan of animals in general, so I'm more than willing to take care of my friends' pets. I wouldn't usually mind, but there's a reason I'm a little daunted by cats.

It was back when I was in the sixth grade at primary school.

We had a female cat called Momo.

Momo was originally a cat that my older sister, who was in her third

year of junior high school at the time, had found; she was a pretty smart and friendly cat that got along well with humans. She was already an adult cat by the time she came to our house, but she learned where her litter tray was at once, and quickly learned what not to do – If you'd get mad at her once, she would never do it again. She would rarely ever meow, and she'd humbly appeal for food with her eyes whenever she wanted to eat. My sister, the one who found her, got busy around those days -- dying her hair red, forming a gang of ladies that would later terrorize the Fujieda area, so in the end it was mostly up to me to take care of Momo. Out of everyone in my family, I think Momo felt the most attached to me.

And in those days, there was a girl in my primary school that I liked.

Her name was Saki-chan; she wasn't particularly beautiful or anything, but she was kind to everyone, and she was always smiling. You could say she was my first love. The first thing I'd end up doing in the morning when I'd get to class was to look for her, no matter how far away she was, I could recognize her laughing voice. In those days, I naturally didn't understand what love was, and I agonized over why I was suffering so much. Anyway, all I knew was that it was not something I could discuss with my sister or any other family member. That's why, I felt I had no choice and started talking to Momo about it.

After I came back from school I'd straight away go and lie down on the balcony with Momo, I started by telling her "There's a girl called Saki-chan", and "It's painful in my chest", "I wonder if she hates me?", those sort of things, When I thought about it now, I must have been a pathetic sight talking so devotedly about such embarrassing things, yet Momo gazed at me kindly and silently.

And then on a certain day – I ran across Saki-chan while going home from school, we both swung our school bags, talked about childish things as we walked the path alongside the paddy fields. And that's when I suddenly saw Saki-chan's hair glittering golden in the setting sun. Isn't she actually very beautiful? And then, the fool that I was, said it out loud.

"Saki-chan is beautiful!" I shouted that out loud -- what were my feelings back then? How should I describe it? I felt that the profile of

Saki-chan's face that I saw from the side was miraculously beautiful, but it wouldn't last for forever. For this one moment, many things meshed together perfectly to show the world the true value she possessed. And if I didn't scoop it up now, it would disappear. That's right, wistful—was a perfect match for how I felt in that moment.

However, in society that would normally be interpreted as a love confession, and girls in the sixth grade were much more mature than boys.

"What do you mean?"

She asked me in a somewhat troubled tone, and I had nowhere to run to after that. That's why I answered her honestly even as my voice shook.

I liked Saki-chan, I'd liked her so long, and so much so that I couldn't sleep at night.

There is nothing more painful than the feelings of love held by a primary school kid. I wondered what would happen after I confessed. Even if she shared my feelings, we weren't allowed to marry by law, and there would be a long, long path to adulthood from here. In that process one would gain, and lose various things as well. There would be all sorts of joys and sadness, and many changes one would go through. At the end of what seems like an infinite amount of time for a child, will that innocent love remain unchanged? Even primary school students have some sense of the difficulties that lie ahead. No, it's because they are primary school students, that they feel it even more so. That's why, I don't know. After hearing my confession, Saki-chan spoke.

"I am normal."

After that, she hung her head down, and restated in a small voice.

"From here onwards… being normal would be for the best."

"Yeah, Hahaha", I laughed in response, despite the sharp wound I received from her words.

Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow. Those words were all I could

muster, and I ran home from there.

Even as I ran, the tears never stopped flowing. The only thing I was sure of was that tomorrow would never be the same as today. A gap that could never be bridged had been created between me and Saki-chan; we would never be able to talk normally again, thanks to my foolish confession. Only a feeling of despair remained, as if the only girl that I had felt closest to in the world had moved to the furthest place.

I barged in to my home crying my eye's out, and immediately ran to my room and started cowering and crying again; before I had realized it, Momo was there, by my side. She kept staring at me with an affectionate gaze. Suddenly I realized that Momo was a female. Just with that alone, I was saved from the feeling that there wouldn't be any females appearing around me anymore besides my family.

"Hey, Momo."

My face soggy with tears, I reached out and stroked Momo's chin and spoke.

"Marry me someday."

For a moment, Momo stared motionlessly at me, then suddenly let out a cry.

A meow.

That was an extremely rare thing to happen.

For this reason, I thought Momo had accepted my stupid proposal.

I got happy, hugged her tightly, and smiled through my tear-stained face.

...Ugh, embarrassing. Just by recalling this much makes me so embarrassed it makes me want to jump off a cliff and spill my spinal fluid on the jagged rocks below. But there is an even worse ending to this embarrassing story.

In my second year of high school, I finally got a girlfriend.

She was a first-year junior, a girl who had joined the basketball club as a manager. She was somewhat blunt and had a tendency to speak out boldly, even to her male seniors, but I think that quirk of hers was liked by everyone. She would speak to me frankly: “You’re an idiot”, or “You need to practice cutting in more”, she would arrogantly point out. That's why, unlike the other girls, I was able to say things like, "Shut up!” and “You just stick to your own damn job”.

And on a day like that, I stayed behind in the gym to practice my three-point shot, she came by and suddenly spoke “Your hand placement is bad.” We had just lost a practice game, and one of the reasons for our loss was that I missed a three-point shot at a crucial moment, so I was feeling deeply responsible. That’s why I unintentionally ended up yelling out in anger, “Shut up.”

However, she didn’t stop.

“You only need to shoot it with one hand, but you keep using both hands most of the time.”

“I know that, dammit.”

“I already told you that in spring, but you still didn’t fix your game.”

“If I could have fixed it sooner, I would have done it a long time ago.”

“You don’t seem like you want to fix it.”

“The hell did you say?”

I dropped the ball down and glared at her; without backing down she glared back at me in defiance.

“How would someone like you know that?”

She pursed her lips tightly as she replied:

“I know it because I’ve been watching you for a long time.”

‘Watching you for a long time’, Feeling a strange indication in those words, I got flustered.

After that I ignored her, and began to practice my shooting once more.

“You really are an idiot.”

Leaving me with those words, she ran off.

Well, I’ll leave out the details --- but after that, we started to become aware of each other’s feelings, and we started dating. I was the one who confessed to her. All she did was nod her head in a shy way; then when I realized that for the first time in my life, I had made a "girlfriend," I hopped back home and reported it to Momo straight away.

“I made a girlfriend.”

Momo merely raised her eyes.

“She’s a little arrogant, but she’s not a bad girl.”

I spoke somewhat embarrassed, but I was grinning broadly as I said it.

In fact, I kept bragging on about her after that. That part of her is cute, and such; when she smiles, the pit of my stomach feels all warm and fuzzy, and such. All those foolish words of mine, Momo kept listening to them in silence. At this time, I had completely forgotten. The fact that I had once proposed to Momo. And that on that day, at the end of my absolute loneliness, I had been saved by Momo's consent to marry me.

Most people would agree that the early period of a relationship is like heaven on earth. I was one of them as well. Every day was fun, it was like I was slightly floating about thirty centimeters above the ground, frolicking around like a fool. I kept reporting about those days to Momo. Momo looked up at me with her clear, slightly orange eyes and listened intently to what I had to say.

And then finally, it was less than a week later.

I felt Momo’s cry from somewhere while I was asleep and woke up. In the dark room, Momo wasn’t present. I thought she had gone off to

drink some water, so I dozed off again.

The next morning, I discovered Momo's body getting cold in the kitchen. I took her to the vet in a panic, but he told me that it was probably just her life expectancy.

According to the vet, Momo looked to be around twenty years old. I didn't know anything. Without ever getting ill, Momo already had a previous owner and was surgically sterilized, never having copulated. In any case, she was a cat that didn't cause trouble for others, and I never worried about how old she was, or what kind of disease she might have. I felt she would keep on living forever.

And finally, when I was burying Momo in the yard – I suddenly remembered.

I had proposed to Momo.

And she had accepted.

Didn't Momo -- live this long as though she were my wife?

Momo -- who would refuse to eat anything until I had eaten, who would come up into my futon when I went to bed, and purr happily. Whenever I called out to her, she'd immediately come running from anywhere, and would hear out any story to the very end.

I was…I was…I was— So boastful in telling her that I had a girlfriend.

I was going on about it almost every day. And that's why, Momo lost the place she belonged, and died, right? Of course, she's just a cat, right? A person would naturally laugh, it was just simply her lifespan. However, despite being saved once by her in the past, I had forgotten that and kept saying things that betrayed her every day – then, I cried and cried and apologized.

After that, I began to avoid cats, even stray ones on the street. It was a mixed feeling of nostalgia, guilt and fear, and I was too scared to even look them in the eye. The reason being that sometimes cats would look at you as if they are thinking deeply. They would seem to be walking much closer to the truth of the world than I was. The look

that says, "I know exactly what you're thinking”.

Whenever I saw a cat in town, or at someone’s house, I’d think to myself…

Momo must have resented me, right?

Did she think I betrayed her?

I’d always thought that if she did, I couldn’t blame her.

That’s why –

To this day, I'd never kept a cat after Momo, and I thought I'd never keep another one in my life.

○

Miiko was actually, a pretty adorable cat.

Like Ooki had said, she rarely made a fuss, would only ever meow while eating, expressing her happiness. She was pure white, her long tail was always pointing up towards the sky, and was quite thin. However, she wasn’t thin because of poor health, but being well-knit gave her that sort of nice physique. And, you couldn’t really tell from her name, but Miiko was indeed a female. Momo was brown with a white streak, so she didn’t resemble this pure white cat in any way -- but still, the sensation of having a female cat near me reluctantly reminded me of Momo's existence. However, Miiko was quite good at keeping my attention, which helped dispel my past trauma.

If I held out my finger, she’d come over and sniff it. And just like that, she’d rub her face on it. No matter where I’d be sitting, she’d come over and get on my lap; Forcefully curling up just after. She’d always sleep with some part of her body in contact with me, and when I stroked her, she’d purr happily. When I’d be leaving for university or my part-time job, she’d follow me up to the door seeming lonely as she’d look up to me, but she wouldn’t make a sound. When I’d return, she’d welcome me happily in an adorable

way, and I gave all her all the love I could.

I got fussy about the nutrition and taste of her foods, I got her a litter box, and I even ended up buying her one of those cat teaser toys. My already meager spending money just about disappeared, but that was okay. I'd just ask Ooki to pay for everything when he returned. In the end, my life started revolving around Miiko, but—

But the promised two, three days passed, and Ooki didn't show his face.

○

At the end of September, my second semester had started, my daily life became even more hectic than usual. I had wholeheartedly swallowed my senior's advice to take as many credits as I could in my first year and ended up taking a boatload of classes. I was doing my part-time job at the Italian restaurant in order to pay for my living expenses and fulfill my debts. The formality of having to attend beatnik society meetings, and in the shadows of that, posting articles for the occult site Ikaigabuchi. In particular, more than half of the Fafrotskies literature was yet to be translated, I felt I had become a staff member of the English literature club rather than an occult website.

"Hey, Nagi-kun. Don't push yourself too much."

Unable to see me suffer, Krishna-san said that to me every time we met.

'I'm fine', I'd reply with a laugh as I shrugged off her concern. It was definitely tough on my body, but my heart felt fulfilled. I took heart in the fact that my life had finally truly begun. No, maybe it's more like a sense of relief that I finally have a foothold in Tokyo, a place where I didn't know a single person. In any case, a person is able to breathe deeply only after they have a place where they belong.

There was no development regarding the Strange rain in Musashino,

and there weren't any new stories about anything raining down. In the end, we still didn't find a solid reason for that occurrence. Though I could surmise a somewhat sinister guess as to the reason the blood was falling around the clock tower, but –

Anyway, my everyday life was so busy, I didn't even have time to think about that.

And then, on a certain day…

I was dragging along my mama-bike towards the school gate as I was about to leave, and I noticed Yoishi Mitsurugi in her school uniform. I checked my watch and saw that it was apparently end of the school day at the high school as well.

Yo -- I thought I'd call out to her – but my feet stopped. Come to think of it, Krishna-san had made me vow not to associate with Yoishi. That was the condition she put forth for letting me join the Beatnik research society, but despite that, I ended up exploring the clock tower with Yoishi just the other day. And at the end, it leaned violently towards the terrifying world beyond, whose presence I ended up feeling right next to me. No matter how you put it, it's not good to learn even a little bit about that. Shouldn't I take care of myself just a little bit more?

Thinking that, I watched Yoishi as she kept her distance from the group of high school students leaving the school.

Ugh—She was walking along gloomily as always. Her shoulders drooped down, she kept staring at the ground as she walked. She's like a human black hole that drags you to a world of darkness when you look at her.

---Come to think of it, could something be troubling her?

That day, I did end up telling her that I would speak to her in a bright place somewhere in the daytime. As I stared at her lonely figure, which stood out from the countless high school students laughing and acting cheerfully, I remembered that, clicked my tongue, and ran.

“Hey, Yoishi!” I called out to her.

“…Oh”, She turned her pale face towards me and gave a small nod in acknowledgement.

“Hey, how have you been?”

“…”

“…Well, I guess you’re not doing so well.”

That day, on that night -- the thing I saw in the gym storehouse.

The moment I looked back at the end, the feeling of something peeking out at me from the hole in the clock face.

And Yoishi’s words, “After all, there were two people inside.”

When I recalled those words, I could feel something cold crawling up my back once again.

There were many things I wanted to ask her, but even so, when I looked at Yoishi’s dark and gloomy figure, I couldn’t bring myself to say them.

In the late summer’s sweltering heat, I was rendered speechless as I got swallowed up by the atmosphere around her, as if she was trudging through a world of absolute zero.

Then –

“You have the stink of an animal.” She spoke abruptly.

Is that so? Flustered, I sniffed my clothes.

Out of all things, it was completely unexpected of her to be complaining about someone’s smell.

“I’m taking care of someone’s cat.”

“Cat?”

“Yeah, she’s white and pretty cute. Do you wanna come see it?”

If a cat were to snuggle up to her lap she might feel better. Thinking that, I had unintendedly said that out loud, but – when I think about it, she's a high school girl. Inviting a girl her age to my apartment alone is problematic. I thought that, but Yoishi nodded silently in agreement, and began to follow me. She might actually be a cat lover; I assumed that and spoke.

"Miiko is actually a medium-sized cat, but she gets along great with people."

"Hmm."

"Have you ever kept a cat before?"

"I haven't."

"Do you have an interest in cats?"

"I'm not interested in animals in general, humans included."

With that flat retort, I was about to say, 'Oh, that's right, your specialty is ghosts, after all', but I gulped down those words.

"Well, just try stroking her. She's soft and cute."

After I told her that, Yoishi and I rode together on my mama-bike and reached my apartment.

Whereupon we arrived at my apartment and I opened the front door with my key. But Miiko, who usually dashed up to me the moment I arrived, was nowhere to be seen. Huh? I wondered as I took off my shoes and entered inside my room to find her rounded up into a ball in the back of the room.

"Miiko, I'm home?"

I called out to her but she was acting different than her usual self.

Rather than being afraid of something, she stiffened her body as if on guard against something.

"Sorry for intruding."

Yoishi muttered politely as she entered my room, at the same time, Miiko growled as her fur stood on end.

“Whoa… Whoa, Miiko… It’s alright. This girl is named Yoishi.”

I tried to hold her up in my arms, but she offered unusual resistance and darted off to a corner of the room.

“Are you being haunted by something?” I looked at Yoishi and joked.

“Perhaps.” She nodded without much emotion in her voice.

I thought I’d comment – but, for the time being I boiled some water. After serving tea to Yoishi, there was nothing more to do but sit under the same roof in silence – just me, Miiko and Yoishi. Miiko kept staring at Yoishi from the corner of the room. I too was starting to feel a little creeped out by how frightened she was. I mean, what the hell is she dragging around?

“Don't you think you should at least get an exorcism or something?”

I couldn't bear the silence any further and said so, but Yoishi just sipped her cup of tea in silence.

“I mean look, you’ve been hanging out a lot at haunted and other dangerous places, after all. And on top of that, you’ve been seeing things, right?”

“There are some I can and can’t see.”

After muttering something like that... Yoishi suddenly gazed at me.

“Say, I wonder if cats really can shapeshift.”

These words pierced deep into my heart.

“Cats just open the door, but the monster cat[7] closes the door at the end – that legend is often spoken of, but to begin with, why did they start saying that cats transform into monsters in the first place?”

Yoishi kept speaking with indifference.

“Is it their fickle nature? Or their uncanny eyes that shine in the dark? Or is there another reason altogether? In China it was said that if a cat was kept for three years, it would transform into a monster, and in some regions of Japan, it was decided that a pet cat would be killed after seven years. There’s a famous legend that says that older cats start to speak in human tongues, and in the illustrated Sino-Japanese encyclopedia from 1712[8], it is said that when a cat starts to lick oil, a strange phenomenon begins. But in any of the anecdotes, there is no basis for a cat to be able to transform into a monster. Not even in "Saga no Yozakura" or "Saga Kaineko Den,"[9] which caused an uproar and were famous as cat monster media. Cats are described as being able to transform from the start. Strangely enough, this is the case all over the world. The more Yoishi spoke, the more Miiko growled from the corner of the room.

Well, certainly, there are a lot of cat related legends and ghost tales around the world.

Bakeneko[10], Nekomata[11], Cat Sith[12], Kasha[13], Gotokuneko [14], Kinkabyou[15] – Those were all the ones I could remember for the time being, however, I suppose those legends came to be because cats have been around humans for a long time. They've shared so many stories with us that they've become a part of our folklore.

I spoke those thoughts to Yoishi -- That’s right, she nodded.

“However --- for this reason, cats are full of features that can inhabit the human heart.”

After chatting about such things for a while –

Yoishi stuck out her finger towards Miiko, who was cowering in a small corner of the room, but Miiko didn’t sniff it. Poor thing, she's scared out of her mind.

To even scare cats, she’s the real deal when it comes to being a walker in the world beyond.

As I began to think about such ominous things again, Yoishi suddenly looked towards the corner of the room.

From there on she abruptly began crawling on all fours and moved closer to the wall.

“Say, what is this?”

What Yoishi was pointing to curiously was a hot water dispenser.

“What do you mean? The hot water dispenser? It’s to keep the boiled water from getting cold.”

Hmm, replied Yoishi as she then pointed to the stand type vacuum cleaner I had just bought.

“And what is this?”

“It’s a vacuum cleaner.”

“And these?”

“Those are all purpose hangers used to hang laundry with – wait, don’t you know what these things are? What kind of house do you live in, anyway?”

“What kind? An average one room apartment.”

“Huh…wait a minute.”

I stared at Yoishi’s face as I asked.

“Is it possible… that you live by yourself?”

Yoishi silently nodded.

What about your parents, I was about to ask, but, I desisted from doing so.

And the scene drew itself in my mind quite spontaneously.

No desk.

No clothes.

No cooking utensils, not even a curtain.

The view of an empty room, as if someone had just moved in. Yoishi lay coldly on the floor, illuminated by the moonlight. The image of Yoishi, living such a daily life as if it was normal, without feeling any pain – or rather, by cutting off all her emotions -- spread in my mind as if it was almost certainly true; I hesitated to inquire any more about Yoishi's personal life.

--Something's been troubling you; did you manage to take care of it?

Maybe if I had asked cheerfully, everything would have been solved easily.

But the person I was at this moment, just couldn't do it.

This girl has some kind of unique – extremely unique, family environment.

For some reason or other, I had a feeling about that. In the past, something happened to her -- Fear, the organ that's supposed to feel it, died somehow. And in search of that lost forgotten emotion, she abandoned herself to the mysteries of the occult. That's what I learned in the depths of my warped dream. What in the world was it, that robbed you of the feeling known as 'fear'? But I couldn't inquire that from Yoishi, who was right in front of me. I was hopelessly afraid to step into it. It was almost like it was as close to the word forbidden as you can get, something impossible for a person like me to get involved in, an absolute barrier that I would never be able to overcome.

'To save a girl like her, a half-hearted resolve won't do', I recalled Krishna-san's words.

And yet, here I was, having brought Yoishi over to my apartment. Even though I was told not to associate with her, I ended up doing it anyway.

I suddenly realized that Yoishi had finished her tea and was idly staring at her cup.

I took the empty cup from her hands, stood up, washed and cleaned it, put in a tea bag, and poured in some more hot water from the

dispenser.

After I handed it to her, Yoishi quickly took a sip and simply muttered, “Delicious”.

○

Yoishi Mitsurugi went back home right away after finishing her second cup of tea.

I'll get ready for my 5 o'clock job, prepare food for Miiko, and clean the bathroom. When I patted her head, Miiko had started to be coy and sweet to me again, probably because Yoishi was gone.

“She’s always difficult to deal with, so please forgive me.”

Miiko just raised her eyes in response.

I patted her on the head once more and left for work.

At any rate, I'm still a struggling student, and I still have to earn my keep.

I was working at the Italian restaurant part-time at an hourly wage of 870 yen, five hours a day, and about five times a week. Even after doing that much, I only managed to make around 100,000 yen per month. But despite all that, this job was fun in its own way. At first, I had applied for the position to help with living expenses and to get some free food, but now I was quite fond of the time I spent there. The restaurant was just under a ten minute bike ride from my house, located just a ways off from Kichijouji station. My main task was to assist in food preparation, doing everything from peeling garlic, chopping tomatoes, preparing herbs, replenishing all sorts of seasonings and washing dishes. Well, long story short, I’m doing various chores in the kitchen, but if I’m late, I get shouted at, and if you slack off, you’re likely to get your ass kicked. When it gets busy, I have to go out to the dining area. That’s how I learned about the history and taste characteristics of Italian wine and how to skillfully use a sommelier knife to pop the cork. The manager was tough on the

part-timers, but he was much tougher on himself, he fervently researched on Italian food every day and the restaurant flourished as a result. Particularly around early evening time, the restaurant was a veritable battlefield. There was no time to relax, and I had to move fast, almost by conditioned reflexes or else I wouldn't be able to handle things. The high school girl who was a senior to me at work would often insult me, saying I was in the way, and there was a lot of incomprehensible Italian being spoken in the kitchen.

But I got used it by now --- I think. It's way better than a part time job with a lot of free time. Anyway, time passes by in the blink of an eye as 'It's closing time, thanks for your hard work!' rings out from within the store, I can't help but feel a little moved whenever that happens. In the dimly lit restaurant with all the lights off except for the spotlights, I see the cooks opening a bottle of wine for tasting and saying, "Good work!", it makes me really think, Dammit! Chefs are so damn cool. I often end up wondering I should just quit university and aim to be a chef, but, I think of my parent who paid a high cost for my university fees, and it would be bad if I didn't at least graduate.

Well, anyway, after finishing an exhausting day of fulfilling work, I was going back to my apartment late at night as usual. And then, as always, while enjoying the pleasant night breeze pedaling back home on my mama bike –

Was when I noticed.

Someone's cold, emotionless gaze.

I stopped my bike, and looked around.

I was in the middle of a residential area; it was late at night so there were only a few houses that still had their lights on. The street lights are bright, the moon beautiful and there's no creepy atmosphere. But I could feel someone's gaze clinging to me from somewhere.

"Is it just my imagination?" I wondered. I'm sure I must be feeling that way because I ended up meeting with Yoishi in the afternoon. Her creepy presence is still lingering somewhere within my unconscious. After the recent incident, I mostly stopped using the shortcut to my apartment that was next to the sports ground. I hated

seeing that clock tower aka earthen storehouse even from a distance, so I did my best to return through a well-lit street. I knew I definitely had to stay away from dangerous places. I had learned my lesson on how to deal with the occult.

When I returned to my apartment and opened the front door, Miiko quickly came running to my feet. She snuggled her face up against my jeans and continued purring.

“Hey, you seem to be in a better mood now.”

I stroked her face, then took off my shoes and changed into more comfortable clothes.

As I washed my hands and face, I heard Miiko starting to eat her food. Waiting to eat after I return, she’s just like Momo from back then -- I thought to myself, as I watched her continue to eat in delight. Suddenly I realized, the area around where Yoishi had been sitting in the evening was faintly wet. When I crouched to confirm, a stripe of water remained, as if it had been wiped with a cloth whose water hadn’t been wrung out properly.

“What the heck is this?”

Could it be that Yoishi, had once again been dripping wet like that one time? Or could Miiko had drunk some water, and slept here with her jaw wet? In any case, I didn’t pay it too much attention at the time, gently wiped it off with a cloth and went off to take a shower. I dried my hair, and my eyelids soon became heavy, without eating dinner, I went and lied down.

When I got in my futon, Miiko also joined me. Even though it isn’t cold at this time of year, she was like Momo in that she liked the warmth of a human. I tucked Miiko inside the futon and opened the mystery book I had borrowed from the library -- when I noticed something. The bookmark I had stuck inside had changed its position. It had moved further ahead from where I had left off, I had almost read a spoiler.

“I guess I forgot to put the bookmark back.”

I returned it to the point I had read up to, when my eyes fell on the page but—

I felt extremely exhausted.

Without even turning off the lights, I fell into a deep sleep.

Outside my apartment, I thought I heard the sounds of cats moaning together in heat.

○

“Did you go off to a strange place again?”

It was when I showed up at the beatnik research lab after my lectures were finished the next day. As soon as I saw her face Krishna-san said that to me, and I vigorously shook my head in response.

“No, I haven’t been anywhere.”

“Is that the truth?”

Krishna-san’s big round eyes glittered behind her red glasses as she glared at me with suspicion. For a moment, I thought, “Oh shit”, to myself as I panicked.

Huh…? Is it about the clock tower?

I thought so, but I’ve met up with Krishna-san many times since then. If she was talking to me about that, she would have told me much sooner.

“I don't like it. Am I being possessed by something?”

I daringly spoke out in a cheerful tone, Krishna-san pushed up her glasses, and stared at me with a serious expression.

“No, it’s a somewhat strange sensation – Different from being possessed directly. It's like you're alone in the middle of an

abandoned building, and I'm staring at you from a distance, and then I find someone else staring at you from the top of an old building.

Those words filled me with horror. Her words kind of described the clinging gaze I had felt last night.

“D-don’t scare me like that. You certainly can’t see ghosts, right?”

“That’s true.”

Krishna-san gave a deeply regrettable shake of the head.

“Biophotons, at best. I’ve seen things that resemble ghosts a few times, but you could call it something else entirely, and as someone who runs an occult website, it’s certainly shameful, but I’m not someone who sees ghosts everywhere.”

She then took off her red glasses, and began to wipe off the dirt with a cloth and added.

“But recently, I’ve begun to think of it as a blessing in disguise. If I could see them all the time, I might end up turning out to be like Yoishi. Well, I don’t know if she turned out to be that way because she could see them, or if she’s able to see them because of how she turned out to be.”

“But can you tell if someone’s possessed?”

Krishna-san nodded with a very serious look on her face as she replied.

“I think I can sense it. And right now, I don’t think you’re being possessed by anything. I know that, but…. Ummm… I wonder what this feeling is?”

“I don’t really feel like my shoulders are heavy or anything, and I haven’t been having any strange dreams.”

“Is that so? Well, I guess it’s fine then.”

She said somewhat unconvinced.

“It’s not really nice to pry, sorry about that.”

Krishna-san put her glasses back on and gave a sweet smile.

After that she said, ‘well then’, as she puffed up with pride and changed the subject.

“The second half of semester classes are about to begin, and it's a critical time for the Beatnik research society as well.”

“…Huh?”

“Next month, during the Koumei institute school festival, there’s going to be a Mary festival. We have to organize it as part of the Beatnik society, and on the other hand, we can’t take a break in posting updates on Ikaigabuchi. In short, we have to finish translating the Fafrotskies research material within two to three days.”

“T-Two to three days?”

“I’m very sorry to ask you to work even harder after everything you’ve done so far, but it’s a reality of the schedule.”

Well, even if you say that –

Right now, no matter how hard I work, I can only manage to translate a page per day. There are still dozens of pages left. Moreover, the mystery of the Fafrotskies phenomenon has only deepened even after I’ve been working so tirelessly on the translation, making me question if it’s even worth it, and slowing down the pace of translation lately.

“Well, you know, the occult is the occult precisely because of its incomprehensible nature, that’s the fascination around it.”

Krishna-san spoke as if she read my expression.

“I still don’t have a complete picture of the Strange rain phenomenon --- but somehow, I do know one thing.”

“…Huh?”

“The Fafrotskies phenomenon, which has been documented countless time since before the common era – a phenomenon in which something impossible suddenly falls in an unlikely place. Those falling objects include small animals such as fish and frogs, large animals like alligators, and even giant creatures like whales have been reported. Not only that, but there are also reported precedents for blood, nails, mere meat, coins and hair. It's hard to see the truth that should be at the center of the story because it's an extremely wide range --- but, isn’t there a truth hidden somewhere that we’re overlooking in between the seemingly vast variety of falling objects?”

“Which is?”

“According to those who follow conventional wisdom, the Fafrotskies phenomenon can be explained scientifically through the mass outbreak theory and the tornado theory among other things, but the mass outbreak theory is based on the natural condition that the life form cannot occur in the vicinity of the site - and the tornado theory is based on the assumption that the falling objects will be of the same kind.”

“…Oh.”

“In short, even within the cases we’ve been translating, if the falling objects are not of the same type and if the site fulfils the condition for having an outbreak of the life form, in that case the possibilities of it being a paranormal event is low.”

I understand. Of course, it’s a conversation to be had after finishing all the translations, but if we statistically leave out all the cases that have even the slightest scientific explanation, we would only need to research the ones that can’t be explained.

Thereupon, I decided to ask Krishna-san something I had been curious about.

It was about that story Yoishi had muttered in front of the clock tower.

“Krishna-san, what do you think about ghost stories with the warps in space-time?”

“…Warps in space time?”

“You see many of them on the net, right? You pass through some place and when you come back, you’re in a different world. Multidimensions and parallel worlds, you think those sorts of things really exist? And if they do --- could a hole to one of those multidimensions open in the sky, and strange rain fall from there?”

“I see.”

Krishna-san put her finger on her small chin as she pondered.

“The pioneer in the study of the Faftrotskies phenomenon, Charles Fort advocated a similar a theory as well, that a ‘Super Sargasso Sea’ exists above the sky. The possibility of parallel words is certainly an interesting theory that has not been ruled out by modern physics, but, there’s not enough evidence to connect it to the Strange Rain phenomenon.”

Krishna-san then muttered with a look of nostalgia on her face.

“Now that you mention it, didn’t that person also mention something similar once…?”

“….Huh?”

“No, never mind.”

Krishna-san cleared her throat and smiled again.

“At any rate, isn’t it just fascinating? There are certain areas and ideas we can only hit on because we researched such a vast number of cases. A journey to the unknown begins from a single step, as they say.”

...Wait, wasn't that 'a journey of a thousand miles'?

That said, part of me feels like "journey to the unknown" actually fits her better.

The reason why this petite occult website administrator named Shiina Kurimoto does not seem to be gloomy in her research of ghosts is

probably because she continues to hold fascination in this unknown. And that's exactly what I was trying to do. I also wanted to keep feeling something akin to excitement and hope in the occult. There was a part of me that would rather have things left ambiguous. If a day might come where science advanced to a stage where things like the composition of ghosts and their origin would be revealed, I'd end up thinking of them as completely boring. Isn't it good that they're so vague? I'd end up thinking to myself.

And—

And in that respect, me and Krishna-san are distinctly different from her.

Yoishi Mitsurugi would dig up and expose everything. Even if there was a reason for something to be sealed, she'd end up exposing it in broad daylight. No matter how brutal the truth would be, she'd step into any forbidden territory with her dark, shining eyes, and as long as we are attracted by the unknown, we can't help but feel an irresistible gravity in her words and deeds. That's why Krishna-san told me not to associate with Yoishi. I'm sure that Krishna-san herself must have felt drawn to the presence of the world beyond that clings to Yoishi. But it's a ticket to a deeper world where you can't come back if you go too deep, and you have to put a stop to it somewhere.

"It's fascinating, is it? I understand."

Well, if it's just that, I'm convinced. I felt as if I had realized the basic attitude I would need to take toward the occult from now on.

"I got it now! Then let's finish it in two days! I'm gonna stay overnight in the club room today!"

Krishna-san became flustered at my enthusiasm.

"Wait, I mean, it's good to be enthusiastic and try to do it faster, but you don't have to go that---"

"No, just leave it to me. It's fascination, after all!"

Completely regaining my motivation, I slapped my chest.

Being a woman, Krishna-san had a curfew, commuting to school from her home. It seemed her father was strict in such matters, unless it was a something serious, he wouldn't let her stay overnight somewhere else. So, if I, as a man living alone, doesn't persist here, then who else is gonna do it?

"Ugh…In that respect, I'm really jealous of you being a guy who lives alone. I've always wished I was a guy myself."

"It's fine. I mean, even after you've returned home, you're still working on updates for 'Ikaigabuchi', after all."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Besides that, if you were a guy, I'm sure that would make Ikaigabuchi fans all over the country weep in sorrow."

"…Eh? No… I don't think that's true…"

I laughed as I patted the shoulders of Krishna-san as she squirmed in a small voice.

That part of her was quite cute, but above all else, I was happy that my stance towards the occult had been clarified. I was feeling quite ecstatic.

That's why, I ended up overlooking it.

That night --- That strange 'gaze' I had felt.

And even now, I could still feel that dark gaze staring at me from somewhere.

I wish I could have at least discussed it properly with her back then, but –

It was already too late.

○

The western building was crowded as ever late at night.

I returned once to my apartment after my part-time job to look after Miiko, and returned to the club room once again.

In the three-story concrete building, I could see the windows of the club rooms, most of the lights were turned on. Originally, the club building in my university was supposed to close at 10 pm but, that rule was difficult to enforce. In particular, Building A, where all the club rooms for the humanities department are located -- a place where idiots with inexplicable dogmas belonging to the drama, film, newspaper, art, radio, and other clubs would spend their days discussing theories of culture and art.

Mitsuru Ooki, who had entrusted me with Miiko, was also of course, one of them. Culture is born at midnight, he would always say.

“...In the end, I guess I ended up joining those idiots.”

As expected, my body felt heavy after working for so many hours.

I muttered to myself as I parked my mama-bike in the bike parking, but that feeling somehow went away when I saw how lively the club building was. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to continue translating without sleeping, and that I won't be able to continue with lectures, my part-time job, and translation the next day. But, once a man says something, he has to go through with it. I recalled my father’s favorite pet phrase as I entered the club building in a light mood.

I bought a canned coffee on the ground floor and went up the stairs. Crossing the noisy corridors, I unlocked the doors to the empty beatnik club room and entered. With the late-night radio as my companion, I was going to devote my full time to translation work from then on.

With powers of concentration I wasn’t even able to display during my exams, hours passed by in the blink of an eye—

At the break of dawn, I thought I heard a cat’s voice, and I looked up.

Light had begun to seep in from beyond the window. wherein I heard what felt like a cat fight. Loud Meows, and growls; ah, what the hell? Are they mating? I laughed to myself. Momo, who I kept in the past was castrated, so I never saw it first-hand, but I heard seeing two cats mating is a pitiful site to see. My high school teacher, who was a cat lover, told me, "You can't let children see that."

--I guess I'll have to get Miiko castrated someday too.

I suddenly thought that to myself. And, I wondered, if I had kept Momo from when she was a kitten, would I actually have chosen to castrate her? I stopped my hand for a moment and thought about it while listening to the dreadful cat growls coming from outside the window - but I couldn't come up with an answer.

Castration is an act of selfish convenience for humans. It's such a cruel thing for the creatures living in this world to be deprived of their right to bear and raise children. It's true that modern society cannot afford to let cats do that every day in residential areas in their season of heat. But that is for the convenience of humans, not for the happiness of cats. We love cats, but we are cruel to them. No, it's just not only cats, it's the same for dogs and other animals as well. We exterminate them to the point of extinction, and when it gets to the point where they're in danger of extinction, we start their conservation. From their point of view, they would probably say that it's all for the convenience of humans.

Sometimes, when I see a gruesome incident on the news, I suddenly feel like quitting humanity. And that bitterness develops into aimless self-questioning, eventually leading to dark and gloomy criticism of humanity. Even so, a half-hearted person like me can never figure out what should be done. Just being depressed means you won't ever be able to move forward. That's why, for the time being, I guess I'll just have to be as sincere as I can to the ones I met through fate, which is Miiko for me right now.

"After a while, I have to go back home and feed her." I squinted my eyes at the morning sun as I muttered to myself.

Ooki didn't show up on that day as well.

He might be relaxing at his parents' home after a long time or something. What was he going to do about Miiko? I wondered, but it was true that I was able to concentrate on translation thanks to her.

However --- two, three days later, the translation was yet to be finished, and there was no contact at all from Ooki.

"The hell is up with that guy?"

His absence had been pushed to the back of my mind since I'd made a big deal of finishing the translation work that I had yet to finish, but it's been a week already. I got worried, and visited the art club at lunch break on the very same day.

"Is that guy Ooki around here?"

I tried asking but, all the club members there just shook their heads.

"Now that you mention it, we haven't seen him around for a while now." Was all that they said.

Could he have possibly decided to drop out of university altogether? I worried, but he was an artist by nature. That was impossible to deny.

Even though I carried reservations about his disappearance, I was busy with my own life.

I was going to my classes, my part-time job, helping out with posting regular updates on Ikaigabuchi. And I was staying overnight in the club room almost every day, I would often doze off on the beatnik study's table, then Krishna-san would come and wake me in the morning.

"That's enough. I'll do the rest."

Unable to just stand by and watch, Krishna-san said that, but I insisted.

"Just let me finish it to the end, please. I'm fine."

"But if you keep going like this, you won't be able to attend classes anymore. That was never my intention, it would be inexcusable to

your family,."

"I'm fine, I can keep attending class."

"But you don't look fine."

"I'm alright."

I put on a brave front, but I was dozing off during lectures, continuously making mistakes in my part-time job and earning recrimination as a result. But despite that, I was making good progress with the translation, and work on posting updates was going smoothly as well, and in between, I'd return back tot the apartment and take care of Miiko. I'd try to return to my apartment at least three times a day to check on Miiko, and every time I did, she would happily jump up to me each time, and that was the only thing that kept me going.

When I hugged her, she would lick my face, and her sweet smell soothed me to the point where I almost swooned. It's like we're a married couple. I imagine her as a devoted wife who married into poverty – We are poor, and love is the only thing we have.

No, no, no—

What the hell am I thinking?? She's a cat. It's not a good thing for Miiko to be treated like a human.

“I still can’t get in touch with Ooki at all.”

Returning to my apartment between classes and work, I lay sprawled out alongside Miiko as I told her that. Miiko stared at me as if she understood what I was saying,

“Well, it’s because he’s a careless guy, he’s probably slagging off somewhere, but just wait a while longer.”

I informed her as I played with her through a cat teaser toy.

However, I was beginning to have a feeling that I would continue living with Miiko like this.

Life at university is like that. Unlike middle school or high school, everyone suddenly finds their own path to follow one day and ends up disappearing.

Mamiya from the linguistics department got crazy about surfing before summer vacation, in the morning. If he knew there was gonna be a good wave coming in, he'd leave for the sea clutching his surfboard in hand, before long he quit university and ended up working at a surf board shop along the seashore. Okamura from the film studies department seemed to have gotten a part time job at a movie set, he slowly stopped coming to university, last time I heard he dropped out during the summer vacation.

"He's an artist, so I dunno." I muttered as I turned to face up at the ceiling.

If Ooki doesn't come back to university, will I have to keep her?

Well, I guess that's not such a bad thing after all, I thought to myself. Reflected in my tired, weary eyes, was Miiko staring back at me with kindness, like Momo had once done. I was experiencing that after a long time, the tranquility of someone's protective gaze watching over me as I slept.

That's why, I thought it was probably a dream.

Sleeping next to me was, a woman. Dressed in white, watching over me quietly as I slept as she were my wife. I'd never married before, and it wasn't something I could Imagine, but it felt like the oft-reported happiness of a newly married couple.

--Eventually…

- Diiiiiiiiiiiiing* *Diiiiiiiiiiiiing* I suddenly woke up hearing the alarm ringing from my phone.

"…Damn it."

In a panic, I washed my face, cleaned Miiko's litter box and prepared her food, and stroked her face.

"I'll see you later. Sorry, Momo." Saying that, I left for my part-time job.

"Yamada, you don't look so good."

Even the manager even said that to me but I replied with, "I'm A-okay", as I gave a bright smile, and went off to change into my uniform.

It was the second opening of the day in the evening as it suddenly started to get crowded. From there, it's just the tension of the job that gets me through it. "What is your recommended wine?" "We have some excellent Barolo available today." "Hey Yamada, we're almost out of garlic." "Yes, On it right away!" "This spaghetti aglio is too spicy." "I'm deeply sorry, we'll make it again for you right away, sir." "This isn't the dish I ordered." "I'm sorry, sir. I'll be right with you." "It was delicious." "Thank you very much, I'll be sure to convey that to the chef!" Voices flying around, voices, voices. Mixed in with the aroma of olive oil were emotions, excitement, angry voices, echoes of laughter. All I could do was desperately keep up with them, and before I knew it, closing time had arrived.

In the night breeze, I ride my mama bike back to my apartment with a pleasant sense of fatigue.

When I opened the front door, Miiko ran up to me and started clinging to me.

As I picked her up and stroked her, I suddenly felt something strange about the room. What was it? I thought but couldn't come up with anything. It seemed like nothing had changed, but something felt slightly different since the time I left. While Miiko was eating her cat food, I went close to the wall to change the sand in the litter box, when I finally noticed it. The peeled off poster on the wall which I had been neglecting due to my busy schedule had been fixed.

"Huh….? Err, the pin on the corner did fall off, and I picked it up, but I didn't… stick it back in…right?"

I tilted my head in puzzlement, wondering if I had fixed it unconsciously. I had no clue.

For the time being I spent another thirty minutes with Miiko, and stood up again. One way or another, I want to finish the translation work by today. If I could finish that, I'd be able to free up a lot of time in my life.

Under the moonlight, I pedaled my bike towards the club building.

The lights were on in western club building as usual. I climbed the stairs up to my club room. I unlocked the door and turned on the lights inside, On the top of a neatly organized table, I found Krishna-san's personal laptop, which could be called the data bank of 'Ikaigabuchi', and a bundle of manuscript copies on top of it.

"…Huh?"

I noticed. There were a lot less manuscript copies than when I had left the club room in the evening. There were only about five pages left. And, there was a small note there. {To Nagi-kun. There were only a few pages left but I couldn't finish them! I'm really sorry, I'll leave it up to you! --Shiina Kurimoto."}

While reading that memo, I wondered…

Krishna-san had been undoubtedly working hard because she was worried about my health. Moreover, she translated the Fafrtoskies case from the 1600s, which was the hardest in terms of English literature used. What remained was a comparatively easy present-day document. If it's just this much, I could finish it by the morning if I work hard enough.

"Didn't she leave it to me on purpose, though?"

The thought occurred to me. To let me taste the feeling of completion, of having made it through all the way to the end, Krishna-san must have intentionally left me with the easy part - the most appetizing part of the work. She's capable of doing anything, after all, the thought of that moved me to tears. But, well, it was still pretty hard with my English skills - though it was true that I felt

pretty encouraged.

“Alright.”

Flexing my neck, I sat down on the desk and began to work on the last part. I opened the text editor on the computer, and with a dictionary in one hand, translated sentence by sentence, and typed it. English is not my forte or anything, but I have learned a lot from translating so far. Even in long, incomprehensible sentences, if you can find the subject and verb you can somehow manage it. I also learned that words that are not in the dictionary are often adjectives made up by the author. Morning is ‘Morning’, but when I saw it written as ‘morn’, it confused the heck out of me -- but apparently, it seemed to be used in the context of ‘Morning like’. I got the hang of it in this place as I diligently struggled with English. Maybe human beings really do make an effort when they can envision things. I didn’t even turn on the late-night radio which I usually listened to, and absorbed myself in work. I diligently identified the subjects and verbs, and then translated them as if I were expanding my world from there. And then finally, as the sun had begun to rise – I finished translating everything.

As I typed the last sentence and saved, I leaned back against the chair, extended my elbows and exclaimed:

“…I’m doooooooone.”

The sunlight pouring in from the window, felt like heaven. Where was the feeling of sleepiness I had been feeling lately? My body, which had been as heavy as iron, was feeling so light that I could go out to play right away. I stood up and turned on the radio to hear an unfamiliar western song play. It was a country-style song with a guitar as the main instrument, and had a steady and distinctly cool bass sound. And in order to further savor my feeling of fulfillment, I headed outside to buy a canned coffee. Leaving the radio turned on, I locked the door and trotted down the hallway. The lights still shined through about half of the club rooms on both sides of the hallway. I would occasionally hear laughter from within. Some of them were playing instruments. Some of them were washing their faces in the bathroom, probably after an all-nighter. Seeing those kinds of sights absent-mindedly, I arrived at the lobby on the ground floor, I bought

a canned coffee from the vending machine, and sat down on the bench.

Why is it that the air in the morning feels so clear? There's a saying that it purges the darkness, but I once again keenly felt how great the strength of the sun's light was. In an instant, the traces of yesterday are painted over. It washes away all the impurities and makes me feel like I can step into a new day.

"I guess this university isn't so bad."

I muttered to myself as I let the bitter sweetness of the coffee soak into my tired body.

A somewhat closed-off university for the elite. A place filled with the same kind of people. With a prejudiced attitude, I had labeled this university as such; now I saw a different side to it. But that's not it. There are as many truths as there are people, and the world is always multifaceted, that's why it's supposed to be interesting. I'd been looking down on this place based on one aspect alone.

Maybe it was because I was from the countryside; I think I felt lonely in the city's university, where it's difficult to form a small and tight-knit community. Superficial associations, superficial smiles. I felt disgust at such things. But that's not the case. Nothing in university, nor in a city filled with good and bad people, is prepared from the start. Anything and everything has to be chosen by your own self. The place you belong, your job, your friends, your way of life.

And right now, I'm sure I'm feeling this way because of this western club room building. This concrete building, where you can devote yourself to something. People who are into painting, people striving to train their guitar skills, people devoting themselves to editing movies. People who are just drinking sake while debating art and their world views – and probably some couples flirting in a club room somewhere.

Still, there are only people here who do what they love.

Liable to themselves, they do what they like.

I was never even able to notice such things when I was just taking lectures, leaving the university immediately afterwards, and going to my part-time job. In that sense, it was all thanks to Krishna-san and the occult. I've been through a lot since I came to Tokyo, but thanks to 'Ikaigabuchi', I've been able to live without boredom. People everywhere, their futures broaden when they have things they like. Bonding over shared interests, it really gives people's lives something precious... Yeah, that already sounded like amateur philosophy drivel, so I just brought the canned coffee to my lips once more.

"…Huh?"

I suddenly felt as if I heard Miiko's fawning voice from somewhere, and stood up.

No, that can't be. Miiko is in the apartment. The sound just now must have been from a stray cat somewhere.

And, I heard it again.

This time it was screams, as if two cats were violently fighting each other.

Come to think of it, I've been hearing a lot of cats in heat, fighting with each other lately. I guess that's how things are at the end of summer? Thinking that, I stood up. And then, was immediately startled.

--There is, no sound...

The silence was deafening around me. I went outside through the ground floor, and looked around the entire club building. All signs of human life had completely disappeared from the club building. As if someone had pressed the mute button on a TV remote, sound had disappeared from the world all together.

Shaking off the bad feeling, I walked back inside the club building. Immediately afterwards, I climbed up the stairs. Before reaching the Beatnik club room on the third floor, I was sure of it.

I was the only one in the building.

The club building, which had been so noisy a few moments ago, now just felt like an empty concrete box. Unknowingly, I began to run. I was running up the stairs to the third floor and then in the corridor. I tried to knock on the clubrooms with the lights still on. But there was no reply from anywhere.

My heart started to beat faster, and in the terrible silence, my ears were ringing.

"…Calm down, calm down and just breathe." I told myself, catching my ragged breath.

And I continued forward in the corridor with no one present.

All the club rooms still had their lights turned on.

The only thing that remained was the feeling that people were making noise until just now, but there was no one in sight.

It was like – just like, the Mary Celeste incident. The mysterious incident that occurred in the Atlantic sea had been recreated in the western club building. Unbearable fear engulfed me, and I stopped in my tracks to think. Is this a dream? Night after night, I'd been fatigued doing translation work, and did I start dreaming in the club room unawares?

As someone who had once experienced an extremely realistic lucid dream, that was my first suspicion.

Once again, I'd lost sight of the boundary between dreams and reality —

No.

No, no, no--

I frantically brushed off the thought that popped in my head. Acknowledging that would be dangerous. The moment I would acknowledge that, everything would begin to collapse. I'd finally started to stand and walk on my own, but my life itself would no longer carry on. I'm supposed to be cured by now. I'm supposed to firmly stand tall on my own two feet. The childhood curse was lifted,

and I was sure that I had already firmly grasped reality, a reality that I could walk towards. All my instability was born from that inconsistency in my memory, the thing that was messed up from the start, and which was supposed to have been fixed properly. But in the darkness inside my head, which was so dark that made me want to look away, that had begun to glow dimly. No matter where I looked, it was the only thing that seemed to be true, and its presence grew heavily.

That was, in short –

The doubt, that I had not yet been cured.

But to acknowledge that, would be unbearably scary. The fear of being uncertain about your own existence. An absolute fear of there being a domain inside me that I couldn't control, of an unknown darkness squirming inside me.

That moment – I heard something.

It was a western song. It was coming from the club room. From the Beatnik research society – that's right, it was the song from the radio I had left turned on. Suddenly, my spirit, which was on the verge of collapse, rapidly regained its strength.

Get yourself together, man. So what if everyone had disappeared? That's a possibility that could always happen, right? It could just be that they all went back home at the same time.

Finally regaining my composure, I ran to the front of the club room. Then, at the door, I took the key out of my pocket, with my trembling hands, I was about to insert it into the keyhole, when I realized.

Behind the frosted glass of the yellow door, the shadow of a person flickered and swayed.

"…Krishna-san?"

I unconsciously muttered that, but my hand on the doorknob stopped as the alarm signal inside me reverberated loudly.

--No, it's not her.

This figure does not belong to Krishna-san. It was someone a little taller, and thinner. Awfully thin. In the first place, Krishna-san doesn't come to the club room at this time.

Then…who is it?

A gulp of saliva falls down my esophagus, and a nasty sweat runs down my armpit.

I felt helplessly afraid, but I couldn't avert my eyes away from there.

My eyes naturally drew themselves to the figure behind the frosted glass.

I knew it was the figure of a woman. Her clothes were white. She stood in a very peculiar manner, leaning at a slight angle, swaying slowly. It felt as if she were a paper doll, flowing in the wind. Her eyes were unnaturally hollowed out, as if an empty hole stared at me.

---It's her. ---She's the one… who's been watching me all this time.

I became convinced of this, as tears welled up in my eyes.

Only the sounds of the song from the club room, and my heartbeat, echoed in the corridor.

It's slipping away. Something is noisily slipping away.

And I knew this feeling all too well.

In that house that made me anxious. In the abandoned hospital in Hachiouji. And – in that clock tower.

The feeling I felt in all of them, the feeling of the world slipping away, drifted from behind the door.

---The real thing makes you feel uncomfortable.

Yoishi's Mitsurugi's oft repeated words.

It felt like they were seeping in.

That's right, I couldn't feel any life from the one behind the frosted

glass.

“…W-who is it…?”

It was the moment I whispered in a shaky voice. The shadow suddenly moved. It approached me, and then it put its hand on the frosted glass and peered intently at me through the glass. The area around her eyes were truly dark and hollow.

As I recoiled backwards, the girl spoke:

“Meow.”

The sound of someone’s footsteps.

Breathing. A noisy conversation.

The hustle and bustle reverberated in my whole skull, waking me from my slumber.

It seemed I had lost consciousness. I was slumped over in the corridor, my body lying spread-eagled.

A couple of female students with badminton rackets in hand were looking at me with disgust. I could feel the cold, hard concrete floor on my back. Slowly getting up, I could feel the gritty dust clinging to my hands.

I grunted and stood up, and the female students moved away.

I checked the time on my wrist-watch, it was still seven in the morning. Those girls likely came to the club room for morning training. They probably thought I had passed out drunk in front of the club room or something.

The noise had returned in the club room building.

I could hear the chirping of the birds outside, and from a far-off distance, I could hear the enthusiastic shouts from the members of the sports club being zealous in their morning training. For the time being, I brushed off the dirt clinging to my T-shirt and jeans, and turned around to face the Beatnik research club room. I unlocked the door and checked inside. The place looked exactly the same as before. The lights were still turned on, and the computer had switched to sleep mode. A cheerful pop song was playing on the radio.

There was no one inside.

The woman resembling a paper doll was nowhere to be seen. I shut down the computer, grabbed my bag and staggered out of the club room.

Pedaling in a meandering manner, I quickly biked back to my apartment.

I opened the door; without a moment's delay, Miiko coiled around me.

I hear her small meow, and I bury my face in her warmth and sweet scent. I savor the feel of her fur as it calms my anxious mind. But at the same time, I remembered. I was reminded of the paper doll-like woman from this morning, didn't she also 'Meow'? And before that as well. Didn't I hear something that sounded like a cat's voice when everyone's presence disappeared?

An uneasiness assailed me as I looked around the room.

I felt something in the room had changed once again since I left.

I entered the room just as Miiko began to eat her food, looked around at everything from the low dining table to the small bookshelf -- and then I realized. The position of the books had changed. I'm not a particularly meticulous person, but I've been arranging my magazines in order of size. That's simply for appearance's sake, not classified by type. Instead, they were now arranged according to publisher type. Is it a coincidence? Did I just half-mindedly cram them in there and they turned out to be like that?

From then on, I opened a drawer in a cabinet next to the kitchen.

Inside, there were supposed to be just disposable chopsticks and seasonings, but the disposable chopsticks were grouped together and the seasonings were organized by type.

My head started to feel dizzy, and I opened the door of the modular bathroom to wash my face anyway.

And there, I saw it.

There were signs that someone had taken a bath.

Shampoos, conditioners, and other products that I only remember placing haphazardly had been neatly arranged. A towel that was messily hung on the towel rack was now hanging in a tidy manner. The hair that should have been clogged up in the drainage was now gone.

It was as if -- someone else besides me lived here, and everything was different.

In a daze, I stepped out of the modular bathroom.

And I stared at Miiko, grooming herself after she had finished eating.

Perhaps feeling my gaze, Miiko also looked up at me.

Then, with gentle eyes reminiscent of a new wife --

She gave a complacent smile.

○

I took the day off from class.

I pedaled my bike as fast as I could towards Ooki's apartment.

It's already been more than ten days since he entrusted me with Miiko. No matter how you look at it, it's been way too long since I've

had contact with him, and there were a lot of things weighing on my mind.

What's been happening to me lately?

A sense of uneasiness, as if I'd ended up in an ominous series of events. I thought it was all just my imagination, and that I'd get through it, if I just let it be, but it really does seem like I'm caught up in some deep shit after all.

Someone's traces in my room. And the figure of the paper doll like woman in the club room. And what Krishna-san spoke of, the presence of a gaze staring at me from afar. Somewhere along the line, I had felt that feeling too, but I tried to ignore it. Because I thought it was the same thing I felt whenever I would read a scary story. But did it all have something to do with it? Did everything connect to a root cause?

No – no, I should have realized it by now. And even when I admitted it to myself, I knew that I couldn't solve it on my own.

All of the strange things that have been happening to me lately. They all started with a cat's voice. The cat in question being, Miiko. Everything began after I started taking care of Miiko.

"Say, I wonder if cats really can shapeshift."

Yoishi's words sprang to mind.

Did that mean she figured it out from the start?

The fact that Miiko was an existence that brought about some strange phenomenon.

No – no, that's not true.

That's not true, I can say it with certainty.

Even if Miiko's not a normal cat, she's definitely not a monster cat. She holds no malice towards me. Because, she's the reincarnation of

Momo. Because this time, she was born again to be my wife.

Now I was on my way to Ooki's apartment, and in my bag, Momo -- no, Miiko, was crammed inside.

If Ooki was in his apartment, I'd give her back to him.

I wasn't giving her back because of fear. If she inherited Momo's memories after being reborn, there are lots of things I want to say to her. There are things I have to apologize for. But regardless of that, in this life right now, she is Ooki's cat. If he doesn't feel like keeping her anymore, then I'll think about it, but if he still wants to keep her, then there's nothing more I can do.

I can't make anymore mistakes. She's a cat, not a person. I had once ended up making a promise to give a cat a human's happiness. That can't happen. A cat deserves happiness as a cat. I failed to make that distinction, and that's where everything went wrong.

Eventually, I arrived at an old apartment constructed from wood that was on the verge of falling down.

It was Ooki's boarding house. I had visited him only once before, so I only had a faint memory of the address, but I somehow managed to make it. I walked into the common entrance of the building which was way older than my apartment building. Good afternoon, I greeted from outside. There seemed to be a few signs of life in the apartment, but no one came out.

"Sorry for intruding."

I humbly call out, and take off my sneakers before entering. Stepping on the creaking floor, I head towards the stairs in the back. The interior was dim even though it was the afternoon. The narrow corridor is only wide enough for one person, just like an old-fashioned boarding house. I could hear the cicadas cry from outside. It was the only thing that reassured me that there was a connection between here and the outside.

As I examined the door to Ooki's room on the second floor, I heard a sound from the inside.

“What? He’s here, after all.”

With a sigh of relief, I moved to knock on the door, when…

--You’re going to throw me away?

I heard a woman’s voice from somewhere.

In a panic, I frantically checked my surroundings.

--Are you going to throw me away again?

I shook my head at the voice.

“…No. That’s not it.”

I looked around once again, but there really was no one in sight.

I was alone in the dark corridor. And right now – my feet were trembling. They trembled enough to make the floor creak. Inside the bag I was holding, it felt like the weight had increased tremendously.

With my shaking fingers – I motioned to open the zipper – but then, I stopped myself.

--I shouldn’t look at the thing inside my bag.

It was the voice of my instincts warning me.

Without knowing why, something told me that what was inside the bag was neither Momo, nor Miiko—but the woman I had seen in the club room -- the one with warped, black eyes.

○

In the end, I couldn’t even knock on Ooki’s door.

I staggered back to the university carrying the bag with Miiko inside.

The sun was already high in the sky. I chose a less crowded part of

campus and sat alone on the edge of the lawn.

I put my fingers in my hair, and tore my hair out. Not knowing what to do from now on, I unconsciously took out my phone. There was a message on my phone. It was from Krishna-san.

《Congratulations on finishing your work. You've done well.》

I should have felt jubilant at being praised, but my heart remained still and heavy as iron.

My dead cat has returned to me.

I thought about replying that way, but decided not to.

I don't know where to begin the story, and Krishna-san might recognize Miiko as a monster cat and start working to exorcise her. But I felt that wasn't true. She hasn't done anything wrong. She simply returned to be by my side, to fulfill the promise she kept with me.

A light breeze blows past me.

I guess summer has ended, I surmise as I look up to the sky.

In front of the main school building, lots of students were laughing as usual. They were all dressed in clean, trendy clothes, laughing happily together and having fun as if they alone exemplified youth. It really wasn't the kind of atmosphere I could join in straight away, but even just being around so many students, I felt the fear clinging to my body slowly dissipate. After watching them for some time – I finally gathered the courage to open my bag.

I took a single breath, and outstretched my trembling fingers – towards the zipper.

And in a single breath, I opened the bag.

There was no such thing as a monster inside.

Nor was there any sign of the slanted woman.

There was only Miiko, who pushed her face out of the bag with a small meow.

Miiko wasn't smiling anymore.

She merely looked up to me with a single-minded look of trust on her face.

With a sigh of relief – I stroked Miiko as I inquired.

"Are you… Momo's reincarnation?"

I felt like an idiot. If she were to answer 'That's right', what would I do then?

But I couldn't help but ask.

Miiko merely looked up to me with clear eyes. She neither made a sound, nor spoke.

It really must have been an auditory hallucination back then. I had half-heartedly tried to return Miiko to Ooki, and my reluctant heart had ended up hearing that auditory hallucination.

But --- all of a sudden, I felt it again, a gaze.

It was that gaze. The gaze that had been haunting me lately, as if I were confronting an unfathomably deep hole.

--Where is it? Where is it… coming from…?

I tried to trace that presence as I looked around me, and… I noticed it.

On rooftop of the building of the main school building, someone was there.

It was a thin, young girl. She was tall, wearing white clothes. Her shoulder-length hair danced in the wind. She was swaying like a paper doll. Her face was too far away to make out, but --- but the edges of her eyes were dark and hollow. Only the area around her eyes remained unnaturally dark. But I knew that those hollow eyes

were fixed on me.

“…Ah.”

Suddenly, I felt as if the girl smiled – and it was the next moment.

Without warning, the girl… jumped.

Gradually, As if in slow motion.

Like a dream, she falls down to the ground from the roof.

As I reflexively flinched and looked away -- I heard a crunching sound.

I couldn’t move from that spot.

It was as if I couldn’t comprehend what had just happened in front of me.

Someone had jumped. From the roof. I heard a crunching sound. The sound of something being crushed. The sound of something bursting. However --- no one made a commotion. The students continued to laugh, as if nothing happened. They were laughing and murmuring, as if there was something fun going on. Apathy. Indifference. Insouciance. Even though someone fell. They paid no attention to events that didn’t concern them. To the very end, they shut themselves in their community. A community that I, and only I, could not enter. That's not true, is it? Even though someone fell down, why isn’t anyone coming to help?

Feeling a cold isolation -- I timidly turned my eyes to face the spot where the girl had fallen.

However, there was no one there. There was no body. There was no blood. That spot was just a stone floor with not a single piece of trash on it.

“…What…?”

The scenery blurred. I stared at the crowd of students, feeling like I wanted to cry.

--Something… was wrong with me.

It's not that they're coldhearted, it was I who was messed up.

It’s all because I’m not normal. It’s because I still haven’t been cured. That’s why, I couldn’t associate with those guys over there. It wasn't their fault, it wasn't that they were bullying me, it was just me who was broken.

I heard a voice say, ‘Meow.’

As if to gently comfort me, by saying, "It's okay.”

And then, I finally realized.

“So that’s why, huh?”

I spoke to Miiko – or rather, to the white cat reincarnation of Momo.

“So that’s the reason you are white?”

--A garment with a Saiwaibishi pattern. [16] A white short sleeved kimono. [17] The Uchikake that was worn-- [18]

It reminded me of the only wedding I’d ever attended, the traditional Japanese wedding[19] of my paternal cousin.

My cousin was so beautiful, with a silent joy and a trace of nervousness on her white face.

Momo’s pure white fur, served as a white kimono.

To become my wife. To be my bride. To be my companion for life. And thenceforth, share in all my hardships. And if that wish couldn’t come true – she had demonstrated that she would simply die again.

Something inside me, something that was barely holding me together, broke away.

“Alright, I get it.”

I declared to that white kimono wearing woman.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I remember my promise. I was about to say those words – when...

"Momo-chan isn't thinking that at all."

Hearing that familiar voice – I looked up, and saw -- Yoishi Mitsurugi.

In her usual Koumei school uniform, her black tie was swaying in the wind.

With her usually sickly pale face, her dark eyes shined, as she quietly started at me.

Miiko immediately began to growl as she leaned out of the bag.

But Yoishi didn't care, as she bent forward.

"Get out."

She brought her face right in front of Miiko's, and asked.

"Who are you? What are you trying to do?"

With each word, Miiko growls became louder and angrier.

"You seem to be interested enough to live together and observe him – but why is that?"

However, I perceived it. Miiko wasn't making a voice out of precaution or fear. Miiko was…laughing. She opened her red mouth in delight, as if she had found a being of her own kind. Yoishi continued to speak as if they had known each other for many years.

"Yes, that's true. This person will certainly join his heart with anyone. Be it the living or the dead, as long as there's room for compassion, he'll do it. He can't abandon others to their pain. Even if it has nothing to do with him, he can't use that as a justification.

That’s why he gets involved. That's the interesting thing about this person, he's helplessly foolish.”

I didn’t know if I was being praised or disparaged harshly -- but I continued to stare at Yoishi.

“However, if you intend to associate with this person any longer, I won’t show you mercy.”

Yoishi paused for a moment, gave Miiko a cold stare, and said:

“This person is a friend candidate of mine.”

---Friend… candidate…?

The hell is that? I wondered, as Yoishi suddenly outstretched her hands.

In the next moment, *Slap*, Yoishi slapped her hands in front of Miiko’s eyes with great force.

In an instant –

I felt something break. As if time quickly began to move again, a feeling of warm air seeping out of a crack in the ice. And then the strange air cleared up. Somewhere along the way, I realized that something heavy must have wrapped itself around me. Even Miiko gave a blank stare, and stopped growling.

“It seems that Nekodamashi[20] is really effective.”

“…Nekodamashi?”

I remained dumbfounded at Yoishi’s words – before long, Miiko began to look around her surroundings restlessly, and started struggling to get out of my bag.

“H-hey, Miiko!”

However, it seemed like Miiko didn’t recognize me at all. As if she were surrounded by strangers she’d never seen before, she couldn’t understand why she was shoved into a bag. She squirmed and

wriggled, eventually slipping out of my arms, and ran off somewhere at breakneck speed.

““H…hey, Miiko!”

In a panic I stood up, and Yoishi spoke to me.

“That cat’s probably not named Miiko.”

“Huh?”

“I think it’s just a stray cat.”

“No, what are you saying? That’s Ooki’s cat I was taking care of…”

“That’s not it.”

“I shouldn’t have kept ignoring her, that’s why the girl ended up turning her eyes to you.”

“…Huh?”

--A girl? Turning her eyes to me?

“Something resembling a stain that remained in this school. And the other ghost inside the clock tower.”

With those words, I recalled the thing I'd seen that night when I'd left the clock tower -- something clinging to the old woman's leg.
‘Because it’s fun, after all’, The whisper reverberated in my ears once more.

“It certainly is a slightly troublesome ghost.”

Yoishi spoke with a sigh and turned back. Just like that, she put her hands in her pockets and walked away, looking somewhat pained.

○

It was a few days afterwards.

I couldn't find Miiko no matter how hard I looked for her. Afterwards, I went to visit Ooki's apartment again. I had lost the cat he had asked me to take care of. I was going to get down on my knees and apologize. As a token of my apology, I had even bought an expensive package of sweets with my full allowance this month. However, when he opened the door and came out, Ooki said something unexpected.

"Hey Nagito, it's been a long time."

"…Huh?"

"Well, I've been cooped up in here for a while now. I've been working hard on finishing my artwork for the school festival in the fall."

I looked inside, the small room had an easel with an incomplete painting, countless art supplies on the side table, and it was filled with the pungent smell of turpentine and painting oil.

"Look at this. It's gonna be a masterpiece, don't you think? It's been a while since I've been on a roll like this."

"Uh…Yeah it's good, but… I wanted to talk about Miiko."

"What the heck is Miiko?"

"…"

The conversation didn't go well, and I somehow took the long way around to find out that Ooki hadn't been to my house that day. In fact, he bluntly stated:

"I didn't leave my cat with you, and I never had a cat in the first place."

…No, wait a minute.

Then who was the Mitsuru Ooki who came that day?

And worse yet, what was the Miiko he gave to me on that day?

"Do you think I even have the composure to take care of a cat? I

might end up eating it if I get careless.”

He laughed at me with a dumbfounded look on his face; I tilted my head in contemplation and left Ooki’s place.

I returned to my university right away, and encamped outside of the affiliated school’s gate.

If I didn’t get an explanation from Yoishi, I’d be having nightmares about cats in my dreams.

Eventually the high school classes ended, and I found Yoishi coming out with her head dropped down, as always, she had the aura of death around her. I rushed over to her and started interrogating her.

“What the hell was that all about? Do you even know?”

With a vacant gaze Yoishi looked at me and spoke.

“Oh, it’s you.” She muttered her usual line.

"Don't 'it's you' me. And at least tell me your phone number for once. Why do I have to wait outside the school gates every time I want to meet you like some kind of flunkey?" Yoishi silently took out her black phone in response and displayed her phone number on the screen. Ohhh, I hurriedly typed it into my own phone and rang her number once.

“That’s my contact number.”

I told her, and then I felt pathetic, wondering why I finally did it after all this time.

“Anyway…that’s all and good. But about that cat. That white cat named Miiko. Ooki told me he never owned it, but what does it all mean?”

Yoishi then replied in a bothered tone of voice:

“Didn’t I tell you? That was just a stray cat.”

“No…surely, that’s not true. That cat was named Miiko, or rather, it

was really Momo…”

I was mid-sentence when I suddenly realized.

That time – she definitely said: “Momo-chan isn’t thinking that at all.”

“Y-you, how did you know that name….? I mean, how did you know the name of the cat I had when I was a kid?”

“Because, you’ve always had a brown cat with a white streak by your side.”

“Huh?”

“I saw most of her memories: That she was called ‘Momo,’ that she often used to sleep by your side, and how much you cherished her.”

“I…is she here, now?”

When I asked her that, Yoishi shook her head quietly.

“She disappeared to try and get rid of the girl inside that cat. The Nekodamashi was certainly effective, but Momo’s help from the inside was essential.”

Saying that, Yoishi began to walk away.

--Wait a minute.

To get rid of? What do you mean she disappeared to get rid of the girl?

Confused, I ran ahead of Yoishi and turned around to ask:

“Hey, what are you saying? You mean to tell me that Momo’s been next to me ever since she died?”

Yoishi gave a small nod.

I --- I….

I never even… had the faintest clue. Why couldn’t I notice her

existence in the least? Shaking my head in complete disgust at my own insensitivity, I once again asked:

“Say, Yoishi. Tell me…”

There were many things I didn’t know, like the troublesome ghost inside of Miiko, and why she was gazing at me. But right now, there was one thing I wanted to know far longer than anything else. No, it was something I needed to know.

“Didn’t Momo… didn’t she resent me?”

Yoishi stopped in her tracks. Then, after looking me straight in the eyes, narrowed her eyes slightly and said:

“The only thing in Momo-chan’s mind, were treasured memories.”

“…”

“She said that she loved you. That you always treated her like a person, not a cat. From the bottom of her heart, she was happy to disappear for your sake.”

…Damn it all, it’s no use.

The moment those words reached my heart, I forgot that I was standing in front of Yoishi, and... I burst into tears.

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Case 06: Rororo

『Am I the one reading the book? Or am I the one being read by the book?』

It was on a Monday afternoon in October when I picked up a piece of paper with these words written on it. It was lying in front of the student bulletin board; I had gone there to get information about class cancellations and noticed a piece of paper lying on the ground.

“The hell is this?”

If you look at the text alone, it seems somewhat philosophical, like a poem of an excessively self-conscious student. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time, and I quickly tucked it into my pocket as an acquaintance approached me. I wasn’t particularly interested in it or anything, thinking I’d just throw it away in a trash bag later. However, a few days after that, I was in the main auditorium during a lecture on Introduction to Political Science, when I noticed that something was stuck on the edge of the compartment of my desk. It was a page of a notebook that seemed to have been torn out, and when I picked it up and unfolded it, I found the following:

『I see, The book was the origin.』

I remembered the meticulous handwriting. Coincidentally, I was wearing the same jeans that day, so I felt around in my pockets and found the piece of paper that I had picked up in front of the bulletin board. I compared the two, and it was exactly as I thought. It felt like a continuation of the note I had found earlier.

But is that really possible?

The possibility that the same person will pick up two scraps of paper that some student randomly threw away, Am I too much of a romantic to believe that it was more than mere coincidence and instead, a fateful event? The thought briefly flashed across my mind, but I still didn't pay it too much heed at the time.

The moment I started paying it heed, was when I was headed to the western club building, and bumped into Yoishi Mitsurugi , who was heading home from school -- somehow or another we ended up going to a coffee shop where we talked about it.

"This person is no longer alive."

"Huh?"

"Yes, I believe they're dead."

Startled, I stared at Yoishi's pale face, she was taking a sip of milk tea as if she had said something trivial. I then asked:

"H-hold on a second. You're saying a dead person wrote this?"

"That's not it, I'm just saying there's a chance they died after they wrote it."

"Even if that's the case, that's damn creepy."

I said so, but Yoishi looked more vacant than ever.

A black blazer and a black skirt. A black tie on a white blouse. Navy blue socks and black leather shoes. In the beginning of October, the Koumei affiliated high school changed to winter clothes, and I didn't know whether to call her winter uniform stylish or funeral attire; Her dark eyes shined as she gave a vacant look. Her black hair, which

was originally beautiful, was somewhat unkempt, and her eyes were bloodshot, as if she hadn't slept at all.

That's right, the reason why I invited her to this coffee shop was because I saw her wandering around like a ghost as usual. I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask her, about the clock tower and about Miiko, but they were all thrown away to the wayside the moment I saw the way she walked out of the main high school gate, it was as if she were drifting in the sky. So, I called out to her, "Hey, I'll buy you a cup of coffee," grabbed her by the arm and dragged her here. Anyway, I was worried because it felt like she didn't care if she disappeared from this world.

"You still haven't solved your problem, have you?"

"I don't think it can ever be solved." Yoishi muttered as she rested her chin on hands to cover her mouth.

I shrugged my shoulders, and for some reason, looked around the coffee shop.

The coffee shop was in front of the station on the second floor, and although it was my first time coming here, it was a quiet store with a relaxing atmosphere. A modern bossa nova was playing in the background, and all the interior decorations, such as lights, tables, and clown figurines, were all antiques.

Maybe I'll come back here to read a book next time, I thought to myself.

"But, it's strange."

Suddenly hearing that voice, I turned to face Yoishi who was looking down at the two scraps of paper I had handed her.

"If this note is a memo to oneself, then there's no need to cut it off, and if it's a message to someone else, it's too all-encompassing."

"Well, that's true." I nodded.

"Look, isn't it by some kind of poet? Lately, I've been hanging out a lot in the western club building, and there are countless guys

composing their own poetry. Especially in the A wing of the Humanities Club, there are a lot of aspiring creators who have a creative fever that can't be stopped."

"Did any of them die recently?"

"You're gonna stay obsessed about the dead guys to the very end, huh?"

I asked humorously, yet Yoishi nodded with a blank expression.

"After all, Kotodama are words packed with feeling."

I felt a hint of something cold in her words.

"…Kotodama,[21] you say?"

"That's right --- The words we normally use without concern also have the characteristics of a curse. Have you ever heard of taboo words? Like Kameari was originally called Kamenashi,[22] or how parking numbers and room numbers in hospitals avoid using the numbers four and nine – Originally, the people of this country were prudent in the words they used, and the sounds they produced. They feared that anything spoken out loud would one day come to pass. Compared to that, contemporary people are rather callous in the words they use."

"Well, let's leave aside the problem of contemporary people."

After rebuking Yoishi, who had suddenly started to get fired up, I asked her once again.

"How do you connect that with this note? And the guy writing it being dead?"

"After all, these words are trembling with power."

Those words gave me goosebumps, completely filling me with horror.

"Trembling --- what?"

"They're trembling. The letters themselves are shaking. They are

shaking as if wandering around for a way out, as if searching for a destination. The more a person's soul is put into a text, the more it trembles with power as a kotodama.”

“No -- but this could have just been written by a living person with a tremendous amount of emotions put into it, right?”

“No…”

Thereupon, Yoishi suddenly looked behind me.

“Over there.”

“—Huh?”

“A man around your age. I don’t think he’s a vengeful ghost.”

“W-what are you saying?”

Flustered, I turned around.

But there was no one there. Just two old ladies sitting in a seat behind me, chatting happily. ‘Hey, don’t scare me like that’, I was about to say, when Yoishi quietly continued.

“A striped T-shirt and jeans. A grave look on his face. Short hair. He appeared there ever since you started talking about the string of words on that piece of paper. He’s been staring at the paper for a long time.”

Yoishi’s eyes shone with amusement as she looked over my shoulder.

--Hey, are you serious?

Immediately, I began to feel the raw presence of someone behind my back, and I sat up. You gotta be kidding me. I don't want to get possessed just because I happened to pick up a piece of paper.

“Yoishi, I’m leaving.”

I picked up the receipt and said that, but Yoishi was still calm as ever sitting back in her chair as she spoke:

“There might be something he wants to tell us.”

“Don’t drag me into it. You’re the one who can see him, so you go ahead and ask.”

“I’ve rarely been able to talk to ghosts. Mostly, they’re just there.”

Yoishi continued to stare behind me while she spoke. She’s probably trying to read the ghosts’ facial expressions and gestures, but it’s downright creepy because I’m right in her line of sight. I couldn’t stand to keep sitting in that seat anymore, so I moved next to Yoishi. In short, we were both facing that striped shirt guy. I slowly traced my eyes to where Yoishi was looking at. I thought I might be able to see something vaguely, but I couldn't see anything. The only thing that happened was that the two old ladies turned to look at us, startled by the suspicious pairs of eyes gazing at them. This is bad. They’re gonna complain if we don’t stop.

“H-hey Yoishi, let’s just go.”

“Wait, he’s saying something.” Yoishi abruptly stopped me.

“…Eh?”

“He keeps muttering something…repeating the same words with his mouth.”

However, Yoishi's gaze was now completely focused on the two ladies who had been sitting behind me earlier, and they were giving us a very dangerous look. A fearsome gaze, as if to say, ‘You wanna fight? Bring it on.’

“S-sorry. We’ll leave right away.”

Right away, I preemptively apologized to the two ladies. When –

“---Ro, ro , ro.”

Yoishi uttered the bizarre words with a look of delight.

“He's repeating, ‘Rororo.’”

○

In the end, what did the note mean?

What the hell is that ghost with the striped shirt?

And what did he mean when he muttered the word ‘Rororo’?

All of this remained a mystery, and several days passed.

I haven’t met Yoishi since then. As always, she left me with nothing but cryptic and creepy information. And of course, she didn’t even say a word of thanks for the treat. No, that would have been fine, but what about this unconvinced, hazy feeling I'm left with? To keep that note with the strange words written on it, or to throw it away, either choice is terrifying.

However, that afternoon – this time, I ended up finding a notebook.

The place I discovered it was in a large common room on the second floor of the university's student hall. It was placed on a round table by the window, sitting there all by itself. I was helping with posting updates on "Ikaigabuchi" at the Beatnik lab during my lunch break, and missed lunch as a result. I had free time right around third period when class got cancelled, and was washing down some Anpan with milk – when that notebook strangely allured me.

I looked around in all directions. The common room was exceptionally large. It was so large that many of the clubs that didn’t have their own club rooms used it as a gathering spot. But at that time, perhaps because it was the middle of third period, there were only a few groups of students huddled together in sparse numbers. No one was near that table by the window side.

After thinking about it, I stood up and moved my chair next to the table. And I took the notebook in hand. It was an elegantly looking, dark-red colored notebook. It was sold for around 300 yen at the campus store. But when I opened it and saw the first page, I was horrified. It was written in the same meticulous handwriting.

“…Damn it, stop messing with me!”

Getting flustered, I threw away the notebook, and looked behind me.

Of course, there was no one there, that guy wearing the striped shirt Yoishi spoke of might have been there, but I couldn’t sense his presence. And yet, even if he keeps placing creepy things everywhere I go, there’s nothing I can do for him.

“Hey, if you have something to say, go to Yoishi. I can't hear or see what you're saying.”

I must have looked like some kind of lunatic to the other students, muttering such things by myself. But I couldn’t help it -- what scares you, scares you. I was about to get up and leave – when I caught a glimpse of it.

On the last page of the notebook I threw away, there was a name – ‘Kouhei Niijima’.

Yoishi was right.

After that I proceeded to the student affairs office, informed them about the notebook I had picked up and tried inquiring about the guy called ‘Kouhei Niijima’. The staff member who dealt with me was a man over forty, who gave me a strange look at first, then changed to a somber one, and informed me. That student is no longer with us, he spoke in a hushed tone of voice. “Because he passed away last month.”

Judging from his manner of speaking, Kouhei Niijima apparently committed suicide. Of course, he didn't give me any details as to why or where. I had no way to ask any more questions. I said a word of thanks and left the student affairs office at a loss.

That note really had been written by a person who had died.

There were signs that a few pages inside the notebook had been

ripped out, and that matched with the first note I had found. The question was, why did it manifest in front of me in its entirety? And the words Yoishi had mentioned: ‘Rororo’, what did they mean?

In the early afternoon, I sat down on the bench in the courtyard. There, I opened the weathered, dark-red notebook. Rather than using it as a schedule notebook, Kouhei Niijima seemed to be have been using it more to write casual notes. Passing my eyes over the descriptions on the first page, I found out that he was a freshman like me, belonging to the Japanese Literature Department. His hometown was Hirosaki in Aomori, and on the first few pages, he laments endlessly about being homesick and how he couldn’t make any friends.

Before I realized, I had become absorbed in reading the notebook.

Kouhei Niijima was working part-time at a convenience store. He couldn’t hide his peculiar Aomori accent, which often made the customers laugh, but troubled him. He seemed to be somewhat introverted, and didn’t hang out with any of his colleagues from work. Even in the university’s linguistic class, he didn’t have any people he was close to, and was always hanging out at the library. The books he had read and his brief impressions on them were jotted down. I knew about Osamu Dazai and Shuji Terayama, but when it came to Yojiro Ishizaka, Ujaku Akita, and Zenzo Kasai, well, I wasn’t particularly a literary enthusiast so I didn’t know those names. According to the description, apparently all the authors were from Aomori. As if he were nostalgic for his hometown, Kouhei Niijima seemed to have collected and read their writings.

His day was almost entirely made up of waking up at the boarding house, going to university, and either going to his part-time job, or spending time in the library. There was no account of him going anywhere for fun, or talking with anyone. Just the things he ate, and the books he read, that was all. With the impressions I got from his meticulous handwriting, the loneliness of his life was vividly depicted in my mind. I myself felt anxious the first few weeks after I moved out of Shizuoka. There were so many people in the city, and I didn't know any of them. I was always threatened that Tokyo would be a scary place to live, and in fact, looking at the unending crowds in front of the station even at night, I felt that time passed differently

than back home. However, I had ‘Ikaigabuchi’. A group of like-minded people who spent twenty-four hours gleefully discussing some paranormal thing or another. Even if I didn’t get along well with anyone in my class, and even if I didn’t belong to any club, as long as I could read the bizarre stories there, my loneliness would be alleviated. But Kouhei Niijima didn’t seem to use the internet, and although he had a cell phone, he hardly ever seemed to use it. I guess books were his only friend -- I sighed. Well, I guess there is meaningfulness in spending the first period of your life with nothing but solitude and literature as your friend, but I don’t think I could do it. If you kill yourself after all, that meaningfulness will never flourish.

As I continued flipping through the pages, feeling somewhat depressed, in the middle of the notebook, I found a page with a single line written.

『I met her today.』

There was just one line on that page.

In the dull accounts of the notebook, that line out stood out.

Hey, hey, hey, is it suddenly turning into a love story?

Even if that’s the case, these notes are from someone who committed suicide. I thought it would continue to get darker and increasingly depressing, but that line captivated my interest. However, mentions of the ‘girl’ didn’t increase from there on. There were only occasional mentions of greeting her, or making eye contact. I found myself rooting for Kouhei Niijima the more and more I read. Like, ‘Hey, hurry up and talk to her already!’ Even in his somewhat detached writings, I felt that Kouhei Niijima was taken in by that ‘girl’. Finally, after a few pages, I saw an account that said that the girl had an interesting way of thinking. Then it concludes by saying that she is indeed an extremely interesting girl. I was already skimming vigorously ahead, chasing mentions of the ‘girl’. At any rate, she seemed to be a slender, beautiful girl, and she seems to be intelligent -- but the whole picture is a bit vague. It was hard to infer whether

Kouhei Niijima was indifferent or whether the girl had no distinctive features. Then, without any particular event happening with her, the accounts continued in a matter-of-fact manner, until I finally landed on a blank page. When I turned the page, I found that one had been torn out.

"…What the hell is this?"

I uttered, and then remembered: 'Oh, right', I took out the two scraps of paper from the notebook I had picked up earlier.

I matched the torn parts to the notebook, and it looked like that the latter scrap I picked up with 『I see, The book was the origin.』 had been written first. But when I compared the contents of that scrap of paper to the contents of the previous page, it was quite incomprehensible. I mean, the notebook is like a bunch of random memos jotted down, so it's filled with parts which don't make much sense, but I felt that the appearance of that 'book', was too sudden. Continuing a few pages after that, the book didn't make an appearance again, it just alternated between the girl, his part-time job, and the food he ate. And then, another ripped page appeared. I matched the remaining note, 『Am I the one reading the book?』 It matched perfectly. However, that too was incomprehensible. Neither the book's title nor his impressions were written down. And that was Kouhei Niijima's last entry. Only about a third of the notebook remained, the rest of which was blank.

"The book is the origin… the origin of what?"

I closed the notebook, and looked up.

Before I had realized, the palm of my hand had gotten sweaty, I wiped it on my jeans.

I was so immersed in the world of the notebook to the point where I had forgotten where I was for a moment.

Nearby, on the lawn of the campus courtyard, a group of students were laughing loudly. They had a lot of tennis bags next to them, so I surmised that they belonged to a tennis group. The bitterness etched in the notebook, and the cheerful laughter of the group members was

in complete contrast to each other.

And -- that just made Kouhei Niijima's loneliness all the more apparent.

What lay in the palm of my hand, was the life of a man who was already dead. It was the fragment of a man who, until a month ago, was living, worrying, eating, and reading.

Kotodama – why did Yoishi say those things? But she was right. There was still a hint of him in here. If you'd open the notebook, his presence would linger in the air. But Kouhei Niijima, there might be something you want to say, but, It's impossible for me. I'm a special kind of coward. I've had this happen to me before, and I suffered greatly for getting too emotionally involved.

"…I'm sorry."

Apologizing, I softly put down the notebook on the bench.

Immediately, I stood up and walked away without looking back. I shoved my hands in my pockets, and took a few steps as I were running away, and then – a voice called out to me.

"Hey, you there."

It was an overly-familiar voice, one I'd heard somewhere before.

"You forgot your notebook."

…Damn it. I was found out.

With those sorts of regrets, I turned around--

And there was a somewhat familiar figure of a tall and lanky man. He was dressed in a cool, indigo-dyed kinagashi, and with a smile on his white, smooth face, he was looking at me.

"Ah, you're—"

"Yo, it's been a while."

The man approached me with a grin, picked up the dark-red notebook I'd intentionally left behind on the bench, and held it out to me.

“What a coincidence to see you again.”

His white face was set like a kabuki stage actors’, and he was stroking his thin, shallow beard. And his seemingly friendly smile reminded me of something akin to physiological disgust. I felt a chill, as if I had seen a fox in human form during broad daylight.

That’s right, it was the man who had once guided Yoishi and me to the world of dreams. He seemed to be Krishna-san’s teacher, a dweller of the world beyond.

“W-what are you doing in my university?”

The man in Japanese clothing replied with a grin as he kept his hands in his pockets.

“What? I'm just here looking for something.”

“Something?”

“A book.”

My heart thudded painfully at those words.

“I’m searching for a mysterious book in this school. It’s called ‘Rororo’ -- and it seems, if you read it, you’ll die.”

His words -- caused my vision to go blurry.

○

“Long story short, this school is distorted.”

The man wearing a kinagashi peered at me with fox-like eyes and declared.

“It’s hopelessly distorted. I don’t know if everyone is aware of it, but it was probably that way since its foundation. Well, I guess it’s not fair to blame such old distortions on you students here in the present...”

The man, who had been yammering on and on to that point, suddenly stopped speaking.

“But hey, this sure is some good coffee jelly!”

We were in the university coffee shop on the second floor of the students’ hall.

I couldn't say no to the man's pushy invitation, so the both of us came here.

“I mean, for a coffee shop in a university, this is first-class. Not only are the fresh cream and ice cream perfectly proportioned, but what’s more, you can really taste the flavor of the coffee in the jelly. I mean, as long as there’s ‘coffee’ in the name, it's the least you can do, but how many coffee shops just ignore that?”

It was already his third coffee jelly. He complimented her so many times, that the old lady from the coffee shop wearing the white, triangle bandana kept blushing like a schoolgirl.

“You're a nice man, but you're also a smooth talker.”

“No, no, not at all, this really is delicious.”

The man smiled at the old lady amiably and continued by adding:

“To do what is obvious and to do it well. It may not stand out, and it’s not something that’s instantly appreciated, but I think that’s where the foundation of human beauty lies. To think that there are women in this university who do such a great job. It's truly a wonderful thing.”

“Would you like one more? It’s on the house.”

“Oh, thank you, so very much.”

“Hey!”

That's right when I butted in.

“Enough with the coffee jelly already. Tell me, why is our school distorted? What the hell is up with that book called ‘Rororo’?”

“Now, now, please just calm down.”

He then took a last sip of the coffee jelly somewhat regretfully, and took out something from his pocket.

“I still haven’t introduced myself properly, yet.”

He presented me with a pure white business card. In black letters, what lay printed there was:

【Sako Takita, Chief Priest of Okitachi Inari Shrine】

I flipped it over to see that there was no address, nor phone number. It was all very suspicious.

“Okifuto…Katana? Sakyo?”[23]

“Sako Takita, Okitachi Inari Shrine.”

Saying that, the man ---- Sako Takita, took out another business card and handed it over to me.

【The owner of the antique store: Kouroudou, Sako Takito】

This one had the store’s phone number and address written on it.

“This one is another title. I guess it works better in Tokyo.”

“Hold on a second. You’re a chief priest, but you’re also a businessman?”

“Well, there’s no reason why a chief priest can’t run a business. It’s tough running a religious group these days. Especially shrines with no parishioners, they’re barely scraping by. Some of them have even opened up fancy sweet cafes on temple grounds.”

With a look of contentment, Sako then took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He let out a carefree puff of smoke and I panicked.

“Hey! Smoking isn’t allowed here.”

“Ah, is that so? Then is there a place where it is allowed?”

The old lady in the coffee shop, who seemed to have taken a liking to Sako, said the veranda would be fine, and pointed to a seat at the back of the room.

Sako stood up, took the ashtray the old lady handed out to him, and quickly moved to a seat in the veranda. It couldn’t be helped, I sighed, as I followed suit.

“Hmm, this is a pretty good university.”

While gazing at the rear garden, bristled with tall trees, Sako leisurely smoked his cigarette.

“As expected of a historical school building in Musashino. The greenery of the zelkova trees dazzles in your eyes, and the serene construction of the school buildings all give me a sense of gravity and history. And aren’t all the female students so lovely? I’m quite jealous.”

A few female students were sitting at the edge of the balcony, all staring at Sako’s kinagashi dress in amazement. Moreover, being praised face to face by a cunning fox-like smile was doubly effective. The female students exchanged glances with each other, whispering in glee.

“Look, just get to the point.” I sat in the chair in front of him and grumbled.

“You’re a hasty one, aren’t you?”

Sako gave an exaggerated sigh.

“As I said before, It’s a distortion. This school has been messed up since its foundation. It was incorporated through conglomerate funds, and a Christian religious organization was also involved in its

founding, so it may be difficult for many issues to come to the surface, but – don't you see? It's unstable, isn't it? It's a building built up with the wrong foundation which was then continually expanded. That's why the atmosphere here is so grim and why there are so many suicides."

My heart raced at those words. The word 'suicide' was bitter to swallow, as I was immersed in reading about the fragments of Kouhei Niijima's life just a little while ago.

"For example… Can you see that?"

Sako suddenly leaned over the railing and pointed somewhere. It was a bushy area at the back of the library. A dimly lit place of evergreen trees about the height of a man's waist.

"What's wrong with that place?"

"Look carefully, can't you see anything in the hedge?"

I squinted my eyes, and sure enough, there was something in the bushes: whitish, and stone like – what is that?

"Not many students or even faculty members here know about it, but that's a memorial tower."

"M-memorial tower?"

"I believe it's from around sixty years ago, just after the end of the Pacific War. It was built to memorialize a boy who died at this school. But look at it now. It's wrapped in such thick bushes that I can't even get close to it. Anyway, I don't like this kind of thing. If you build a memorial, you should honor it, and if you don't want to honor it, you shouldn't build it in the first place. Surrounding the cenotaph with a hedge, it's like you're sealing up the past."

…That's right. I mean, I didn't even know there was a memorial tower there, and if I hadn't been told, I wouldn't have noticed it even if I were here till graduation.

"Anyway, I don't want to speak ill of this school in front of the current students, but this school does not properly treat the dead.

Instead of directly confronting what happened, they just pretend it never happened, and repeatedly try to cover it up. Even if you put a lid on it, the truth doesn't disappear."

With a gulp -- I asked:

"So then, what exactly is that dangerous book called 'Rororo'?"

"Hmm..."

Thereupon, Sako leaned back deeply in his chair. He took a puff from his cigarette, then smothered it out in the ashtray, then intently fixed his eyes on me.

"Have you heard about taboo words?"

"…Eh?"

"Judging from your expression, I can tell you have. That's right, there are words in this world that drive a deep wedge into people's thoughts and unconsciously control their actions. If words that empower people are the yang, then taboo words are the yin."

"No… It was about that, wasn't it? Like Kameari being called Kamenashi, or the numbers nine or four not being used by hospitals, because they were bad luck or something, right?"

When I conveyed Yoishi's words to him, Sako gave a faint smile.

"That's right. There are simple ones like that, and then there are more sophisticated ones. The ones that you can recognize just by looking at them or hearing them aren't as threatening as taboo words. The ones that pose a problem are those that you don't even perceive as taboo words when you see or hear them."

"Don't even perceive...?"

"It unwittingly traps us in a maze of thoughts and amplifies the negative thoughts within us. It is a word that is best not to know. And I believe that 'Rororo' is probably a book that particularly consists of dangerous taboo words. Words that are better left unknown."

“W-what the hell is such a book doing in this university?”

I asked in a voice that was beginning to tremble, and Sako just shook his head, ‘Who knows’.

“Someone must have put it here. At first glance, it’s indistinguishable from other books, but it was secretly mixed in among the ordinary books in this university’s library. However, if you were to read it once, you’d be bound by the taboo words. You wouldn’t be able to take your eyes off the writing, and end up being dragged inside the world of the story. In the end, you’d lose sight of the border between reality and fantasy, and be taken to the world beyond.”

Sako’s low voice seemed to drift in the air, and I grabbed my knees firmly. I felt If I didn’t keep a tight grasp on my spirit, I would be taken somewhere bizarre.

“That book has a certain peculiarity. The person who reads it would continue to repeat a single thing until their demise: ‘Rororo’. That's why the book was conveniently named ‘Rororo’. It’s strange, isn’t it? What does ‘Rororo’ indicate, exactly? Why do you end up muttering ‘Rororo’? You have to read it to find out, but if you do, you'll die.”

He then chuckled, took out another cigarette and lit it with a match.

The scent of the ignited cigarette, together with a strong, sweet aroma drifted on the wind.

“…So?”

“Hmm?”

“So why are you telling me all this?”

“I’d like you to help me. That book is in this school’s library. I know where it is, and I just need you to bring it to me.”

“…What the hell are you saying?”

“The school administrators knew about the existence of that book. Well, they might have been skeptical, but they were trying to pretend it didn't happen every time. However, there have been so many

suspicious deaths at this school that they finally decided to do something about it. In other words, I was called here by someone at the top; my task being to retrieve the book."

"W-why does it have to be me? I mean, does Krishna-san know about this?"

"If it's about 'Rororo,' then she doesn't know. The fact that there are so many suicides - well, I don't know what she knows because I'm not her, but she's smart. I'm sure she's sensed it."

Thereupon, Sako brought his face towards me and spoke in hushed tone:

"But you know, I don't want her to be involved this time. Because she's been on the verge of breaking down over something like this once..."

"Huh?"

"Five years ago, you see. She got too involved, and it nearly destroyed her. That was the first time I met her."

--Nearly destroyed?

--A person like Krishna-san?

"T-time out. Having me do something dangerous like that is impossible!"

"What? It's no problem. You just have to avoid reading it."

Sako spat out such irresponsible bullshit.

"For better or worse, I'm deeply involved in the Shinto priesthood, and everything I wear, the words I say, and the way I behave is heavily tinged with the influence of the divine. There's a high possibility that just getting close to it will purify the spirituality of the book. This time, I merely wish to retrieve it. The book as it is. Who placed such troubling taboo words in the book, and why? Everything needs to rectified from the source."

“No, I refuse. There’s no way I can do it. In the first place, My –”

In a trembling voice, I shouted without care for my surroundings.

“My mind is still in the rehab phase!”

No, it was a little too late to say that. Up to this point, I'd been involved with the Clock Tower and the Miiko Incident, two incidents that were related to the world beyond. Before I realized, I’d been associating with Yoishi as if it were completely normal. And If I were to go and get this book that ‘If you read, you’ll die’, I’m sure I’ll exceed some kind of limit.

And in response –

“Did Kurimoto-kun tell you that?”

Sako gave a pleasant smile.

“Rehabilitation of the mind, huh? Yeah, that sounds like something she would say. Kurimoto-kun seems to be very protective of you.”

I don't know if she’s protective of me or not, but at any rate, I was the completely wrong person for the job, so I firmly shook my head and refused.

“You’re going to refuse no matter what?”

“Yes, there’s no way I’m gonna do it.”

I nodded vigorously, and then Sako eventually spoke, as if he recalled something.

“Well, it can’t be helped, I guess I’ll just have to ask that girl.”

“That girl?”

“Hmm, what was her name again? That pale young lady with the dark hair, who looks like a medieval bisque doll?”

“Hey…wait a minute. Are you talking about Yoishi?”

“That’s right, Mitsurugi Yoishi-kun. How nostalgic. I wonder if you

still have the pleasure of meeting her.”

I silently glared at Sako, who quickly corrected himself.

“Or in your case, should I say…displeasure…?”

“The hell did you say?”

“She’s interesting. Truly interesting. I don’t hold that much interest in people, but she's the most interesting person I've met in the past six months. I guess you could compare it to the mystique of holding an old and used… religious magic item ---Ah, that was rude. I don't know how to say it, but due to my profession, I have a bad habit of looking at things in terms of whether they can be used as a catalyst or not.”

With eyes resembling a thousand-year-old fox, Sako gazed at me and then spoke:

“Say, could you ask her to do a favor for me?”

○

“Screw that bastard!”

In the coffee shop on the second floor in front of the station, I fumed to myself as I poured in a large amount of milk and sugar into my coffee.

After what happened, I had stood up and stormed out of there and headed straight for the station. I still had some time before my part-time job started, so I decided to head to that coffee shop again. It was only after I had entered inside was when I remembered that this was the place where that ghost in the striped shirt -- Kouhei Niijima had been, but it was too late to go back out now. However, I was relieved to see that the atmosphere in the store was as calm as ever and there were quite a few customers. For the time being, I took a seat by the window, far away from the seat I had taken the other day, and was fuming by myself after I recalled Sako’s words.

To begin with, it's just wrong to ask Yoishi to collect that book. If she knew there was a book that would kill her if she read it, her eyes would light up, and she'd declare something like: 'Oh, how wonderful', and end up insatiably reading it to the last line in no time. In the end, what if she ends up dead like Kouhei Niijima? Will that bastard Sako take responsibility? Already, Yoishi is standing out even less than usual. She's always brooding by herself, and it felt like if I were to take my eyes of her, she could disappear from this world.

"But you know…"

I looked down on the palm of my hand holding piece of paper, and sighed.

It was handed to me by Sako. In it were written instructions on how to ascertain which book is 'Rororo' in the library and such. According to him, the book is on a unique spiritual level and can thus be recognized.

"It's surely not a good thing to have a book like that in the library forever."

I muttered to myself and held my head in my hands.

Kouhei Niijima, a student from the country-side like me, committed suicide on a certain day.

Kouhei Niijima, who had few friends, who was fond of spending time in the library, died after leaving a description about a certain book. In short, Kouhei Niijima, who committed suicide, found the book that Sako's looking for: 'Rororo,' the book that kills anyone who reads it. Thus, he got bound by some sort of taboo words and ended up killing himself, is how it all happened, right?

Words that bind people --- I'm not sure if that's possible, but I don't have enough arguments to deny it at this point. The ghost Yoishi saw was muttering 'Rororo' with its mouth. Supposing the two of them didn't conspire to scare me beforehand, there was no way it was a coincidence.

Unable to think straight, I sighed and gazed out of the window.

The weather had become worse while I was on the way here, and it was raining already.

On the arcade street in front of the station, a lot of shoppers were drenched from the sudden downpour. In the eaves of a commercial building, a few people were taking shelter from the rain, looking up at the sky. And among them, I suddenly caught sight of a girl, wearing the uniform of our affiliated high school. She was a tall and slender, a beautiful girl with a somewhat dignified look. I checked my watch. It was still 2 pm. Aren't high school classes still on? I wondered, but oh well, I looked away. In the first place, my institute is distorted. I'm going through a lot, and everyone is going through a lot. If I intervene in other people's affairs every single time, it'll be too much for me to bear.

But speaking of distortions, Sako also mentioned that there were many suicides. I'd heard a couple of rumors about that, too. The first one happened while I was back in Fujieda for my summer vacation. A girl from our university killed herself in a boy's bathroom somewhere. Another incident that supposedly happened a few years ago, was when a housewife from a neighboring town came all the way to our university grounds and burned herself to death. But I didn't witness either of those incidents, and neither did any acquaintance of mine. It's just one of the rumors floating around within the school. But if what Sako said is true, and the school culture is one where everything is swept under the rug, then few students would have heard about it.

"This school is distorted."

Sako's words seemed to express what I had vaguely felt about this university. Everything ended before it even began. I can't help but feel that same sense of isolation. Then there's some person who deliberately created a book that would kill you if you read it, and placed it in the school's library. For me, that's the kind of crazy behavior that's enough to make my heart turn cold.

"It seems... I ended up entering an unpleasant university."

Before I realized it, those bitter emotions had once again surged up inside me. Thanks to Krishna-san, I had begun to believe that this

university was a place where people were responsible for themselves, and I could enjoy myself any way I wanted as long as I kept myself together -- all that had transformed into bitterness, as if I had just discovered that someone had kicked over a new bike I had just bought.

I recalled the emotion that Yoishi detested enough to make her vomit: the 'malice' that humans carry.

That dark feeling, which once killed the heart of Yoishi Mitsurugi.

"Because she's been on the verge of breaking down over something like this once...”

And I recalled Sako's words at the same time.

Does that mean that like Yoishi, something terrible happened to Krishna-san in the past? Does it mean that there was an incident that would have caused her heart to collapse? Sako had mentioned that it happened five years ago. And that that was the time when he and Krishna-san first met.

Let's see, Krishna-san is twenty years old right now -- so it would have been around her third year of junior high school or first year of high school. About the same age as Yoishi is now. What the hell could have happened back then? I hate to imagine that Krishna-san, who's so wise and strong, could be so easily broken. To me, she's like a Bodhisattva[24], a Mary, a guardian angel. Just knowing something once existed that was enough to drive her to the verge of collapse, it makes my stomach feel as heavy as if I'd swallowed concrete.

I shook my head, and then…

I felt someone’s gaze upon me, and when I looked up, I noticed a high school girl sitting directly across from me in the seat where Yoishi and I had sat on the other day. Even though she was sitting down, she looked as slender as a model. Her shoulder-length, short haircut looked very appealing.

“…Huh?”

I looked outside the window once more.

Wasn’t she the girl who was just outside taking shelter from the rain? I wonder if she came inside this coffee shop because the rain didn't look like it was gonna stop. I stole a glance at her once more; she looked out the window as if to turn her eyes away from me. There’s no doubt about it. It’s the same girl with the Koumei school uniform. Her white blouse and black tie were slightly wet, and her bangs were still sticking to her forehead.

The young girl ordered something from the store employees, and then silently took out a book. After that she quietly kept looking down at the book. I also took out my textbook on Introduction to Economics, which I hadn't even read, from my bag and opened it. I felt like if I didn't open a book in response, I wouldn't know what to do with my time.

In fact, for some reason, I kept stealing glances at her.

How can I explain it? --- I thought she was really beautiful. It was partially that, but also because I felt that this slow passage of time was beautiful. Outside, the filth of the city was gently being washed away by the rain, and inside the store, the sound of mellow piano music drifted in the air. The image of a young girl looking down at a book with an intelligent gaze was very picturesque.

Whether she was skipping school or not, I concluded that it was the proper thing to do. It’s fine if it’s only once a week, and maybe I need to have this kind of time too. And then, all of a sudden, the thought came crashing down on me.

The reason why Kouhei Niijima couldn’t speak to the ‘girl’ in the library.

Perhaps he was in the same state of mind as I am now.

Kouhei Niijima must have seen a certain girl in the library. That girl was also always in the library, and she might have been somewhat lonely. And a library is a place that carries a unique atmosphere. The scent given off by countless books. Books that had been carefully read for a long period of time, and the quiet fervor given off by the people who concentrate on the words within. In this world, vivid romantic fantasies are just a hindrance. However, they do notice each other.

They notice each other, but they don't want to destroy that beautiful, harmonious world. That border that lies between the two, how should I say it? I feel like it's a sparkling jewel in the crown of life.

In fact, if you were to ask me if I could talk to the beautiful girl who was so focused on her book in front of me, I would say that it was quite impossible. It was like a fear at the idea of mixing a foreign substance like myself into something that was already perfect.

--So that's how it was.

I finally realized.

Kouhei Niijima wasn't cowardly, or introverted -- he was undoubtedly, more sensitive than most people. The moment I realized that, the tip of my nose twitched. I felt the clumsy and sincere nature of the deceased Kohei Niijima, I felt we could have been friends, and although it was too late now, I regretted his death.

"You left too soon…"

I muttered in a tone that was a mixture of sorrow and affection. When –

Some kind of words, reached my ear.

When I checked, it was the young girl, muttering something with her lips. It could be that she was so engrossed in the book that she was unconsciously mouthing the lines of the characters in the story. Or, it could be that she found a phrase in the book that struck a chord in her heart.

I just gazed at her with a pleasant feeling.

I admired the movement of her lips, her long eyelashes that were cast down.

Eventually, she looked up. Her eyes met mine head-on. It was so natural, though, that I didn't feel the need to look away. I ended up staring back at her as if I was entangled in her eyes. Her eyes… were exceedingly black, and in the depths of those black eyes, I felt there was another, deeper color. How many shades did black have? I

wondered, when I suddenly noticed.

Her lips moved. She kept murmuring something slowly. And then, the words reached me.

What were those words? I couldn't remember anymore.

And I would later find out that around this time –

A large number of tadpoles had rained down on Kichijouji station.

○

"What are you smiling about, Nagi-kun?"

The next day, during lunch break, Krishna-san looked at me and asked.

"Eh? Is that so...?"

Stroking my own face, I realized I was in a pleasant mood. Why was it, though? I wondered, and it came down to the beautiful girl in the coffee shop yesterday. 'Oh, it's nothing', I muttered in embarrassment. Krishna-san didn't care for the subject anymore and was already taking out a lot of materials from the cabinet. For some reason, there was a tremendous amount of clutter in the usually neat and tidy club room.

"Did something happen?"

I asked, and Krishna-san replied with a disgruntled look.

"Well, a lot of things. But the main problem is the incident in Kichijouji yesterday."

"...Incident?"

"You didn't hear? It happened again, this time in the north entrance

of Kichijouji station, a large number of tadpoles were seen hopping on the street."

"R-really? Is it the strange rain again?"

"We won't know if it's the real thing until we investigate. At any rate, be it a harbinger of a natural disaster, or an omen signaling the end of the earth, this kind of situation has brought out the trolls en masse on the message boards. The server is overloaded with all these mixtures of fact and fiction being posted. I can't even finish updating the damn site with the article you translated for me."

Continually grumbling about such things, 'Ah, where was it?' Krisna-san now began to rummage through the shelves.

"What are you looking for? I'll help."

"No, it's fine. This is a personal thing."

While saying that, 'But it's been so hot recently', Krishna-san wiped the sweat off her face with the towel around her neck. Her faintly flushed face was still childish, healthy, and cute as ever. The light blue checkered short-sleeved dress also looked really good on her. I guess I was relieved to see Krishna-san looking the same as always. I decided to casually broach the subject that was weighing on my mind.

"Um, is it ok if you ask you something?"

"...Hm?"

"It's about your master, the guy who came to my house before -- the one who lives in Aomori, is always wearing a Kinagashi, and is always acting smug with a smooth face."

"Oh, you mean Sako. What about him?"

"Is he someone you can trust?"

Krishna-san pushed up her slipping red glasses with her middle finger, and chuckled.

"Well, he's quite an odd one, but he's trustworthy."

"Which part, exactly?"

"Hmmm..."

The petite occult site manager folded her arms and pondered.

"When I think about it, yeah... There were many times when he offered me a treat but I ended up paying up instead, there were many books I lent him that he never returned, and there have been times when I was peeked at while in the bath."

"Wai--Peeked at? What do you mean?"

"Ah, it's not like that. See, I sometimes stay at Takita-san's shrine for spine correction. They have an open-air style bath over there."

In a panic, Krishna-san tried explain things, but jealousy flared up inside me in the face of her petite, yet voluptuous body.

"I-Isn't that completely untrustworthy?! Krishna-san, are you sure you're not being deceived? Aren't you being targeted as a woman?"

“No, you can trust that person when it comes to ghost related matters. The Okitachi Inari Shrine, where Takita-san is the chief priest, has been famous since ancient times for its ability to ward off evil spirits, but he himself is not from the original family of priests. In addition, he not only studies Shintoism, but all kinds of exorcism methods from all kinds of sects. In other words, um ..... The reason why he's so odd is probably due to his strict training."

"So, he's just a twisted man, after all."

"Well, I guess you could say that... but why are you asking about Takita-san, anyway?"

"E....Eh, That's--"

Being asked in reverse, I hesitated. And I remembered that bastard Sako not wanting to involve Krishna-san in this matter. I suppose it

would be better to keep the fact that we met on campus yesterday a secret.

"Well... You see, now that I've become a member of 'Ikaigabuchi', I ought to know what kind of person the website's boss calls master."

"Ah, I see."

Krishna-san nodded, and then cast her eyes downwards.

Her face seen from the side, staring silently off into the distance, was seemingly sad, gentle, and wore a somewhat strange feeling of transparency. I wondered if I had asked something wrong, but at the same time, behind those eyes, I felt I caught a glimpse of Krishna-san that I didn't know, and I almost moved my hand to reach for her shoulder. I was about to shake her slender shoulders and blurt out something inappropriate like, 'Please don't keep secrets from me.'

However--

"A long time ago, another personality almost took over my body."

Eventually, Krishna-san muttered in a slightly trembling tone.

".....Huh?"

"That personality was extremely overpowering, to the point where I almost lost my true self. That person helped me back then -- well, at any rate, if he wasn't there for me back then, I'm sure I wouldn't be here talking to you like this. And then, I regularly have the airways in my spine adjusted. It's said that that's where the ghosts come in through."

"What..."

What --- kind of incident was that?

I was about to ask, but those words failed to leave my mouth. That's just how dark and somber Krishna-san's face looked right now. For some reason, it reminded me of the remains of a fruit that had completely dried up into a crumbly heap. What was once a juicy, ripe fruit will always rot away once it leaves its roots and becomes

abandoned. Right now, Krishna-san was perfectly healthy, but even this person was a living being, and her health was maintained by a precipitous balance -- such strange, tearful thoughts welled up inside me.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

She must have noticed the worried look on my face, as she smiled.

"I'm fine now. The only problems I have now are eating too much in my three meals a day, and when I feel ghosts close by, my heart is strong knowing that the living are much stronger. I'm no longer so weak as to be deceived by them anymore."

Then she patted me on the shoulder.

"You're the one I'm worried about."

"...Huh? Me?"

"Yeah. You seem to have adjusted to the university quite well, but keep in mind that you're still in the process of rehabilitation. You need to look at the world more broadly, not just the occult. Make friends, find a girlfriend, indulge in food, scenery, movies, books and music. Anything is fine. Move your heart with emotion."

"Move... my heart?"

"That's exactly right."

Krishna-san gave a broad grin.

"Everything that adds flair to your life will definitely strengthen your heart and make it stronger,"

Her soft smile filled my heart as if it were spreading throughout.

○

When I left the club room, I was filled with courage.

After receiving Krishna-san's words – coupled together with a feeling similar to enlightenment I received at the coffee shop yesterday finally took shape in my heart. I felt as if I had peeked into a part of Kouhei Niijima's heart, and with resolve, I had finally decided to help Sako out. Help him in retrieving the book that would kill you if you read it – 'Rororo'. But that definitely wasn't for Sako's sake. It was more of a feeling of wanting revenge.

Kouhei Niijima.

A first-year university student like me, who came alone from Aomori, lived his life earnestly without the support of any friends, with the books in the library his only friends, and in his last days, ended up encountering some kind of cursed book. If things had been slightly different, I might have ended up just like him. But, despite both of us having come from the countryside, I had the occult by my side. I had 'Ikaigabuchi', And even when I found myself in the depths of the other world, I met Krishna-san, who was always strong. It was something I couldn't help but love, and I met a good person along the way. That's why, I was able to crawl up from the bottom of the deep darkness that time.

I don't know what Kouhei Niijima wants to tell me, but being linked by fate, I ended up picking up his note. Shouldn't I at least accept that? Shouldn't I at least lend a helping hand in finishing off that book once and for all? As for 'Rororo,' Sako said it wouldn't be a problem as long as you didn't read it. I don't quite trust him, but he knows how to remove the book from the library, and right now, I'm the only one in this university who can do it. If I just let it be, that book might kill someone else again. With those kind of fired up emotions serving as my motivation, I had finally arrived here, but –

"Man… I'm just an idiot."

I muttered to myself as I wriggled in the pitch-dark space where it was impossible to even twist my body.

It was almost 10 pm.

In this dark and narrow space, my determination quickly began to waver. I was at the Koumei institute library, inside a locker in reading room number four, and I was desperately holding in my urge to pee.

What the hell was I doing in such a place?

Okay, let me answer that.

I arrived at the library feeling a strong sense of duty, and that's when I took my first proper look at the paper Sako had given me. And therein, I found a sentence, telling me to perform the ritual at night. Apparently, for a novice like me, it would be half as effective if I did it in the daytime. I should have looked through it earlier, but I originally had no intention of going through with it so please let's not get into that.

However, sneaking into the library late at night was not such a trifling matter. The security guards would be roaming about, and on top of that, at the entrance of the library, there's a machine which checks you in with your student ID. It was made so that anyone affiliated with the institute, whether they were university students or high school students, could enter the library, but in my case, it was very troublesome. Even if you go inside and hide somewhere to wait for the library to close, you'll be found out since there's a record of your entry.

Well then, what should I do? After racking my brain, I carried out the plan. Just before closing time, I used my student ID to enter and break into the number four reading room where the guard had just finished checking the door. There, I unlocked the window, left and held up my student ID to the machine at the entrance, and left the building. That's how I cleared my entry record. That made it as if I wasn't inside. After that I waited for the library to close, and clambered up the window to sneak back into the number four reading room.

Well, so far, so good. But even though I had taken the day off from my part-time job and snuck in after nine o'clock, there were still

people in the library. The super-serious librarians were working overtime for some reason. So, I had no choice but to kill time by hiding in a locker in the number four reading room– but, I made the bitter mistake of not using the toilet beforehand.

“Arghhh…”

It was past ten o’clock, my urge to pee was already at its limit.

I slowly opened the door of the locker. I held my breath and peeked at my surroundings; all I could hear was a pin drop silence. It seemed the librarians had already gone home. I proceeded to open the door of the number four reading room as well, after confirming once again that there was no sign of anyone inside the library, I rushed across the corridor towards the toilet at the back of the entrance.

“…Ahhh.”

My mind felt at peace for a while as I listened to the raw sound of my urine trickling down.

I finally felt comfortable and was in a daze, but then I finally realized the reality of the situation I was in.

I was without a doubt, in a toilet, late at night.

What’s alarming was the fact that I was most creeped out by ghost stories set in a toilet late at night.

Ghosts are said to gather around watering places. Also known as a bathrooms. The famous ghost stories like Hanako-san[25], Aka Manto[26] and Kashima san[27] are all set in the toilet. I don't know if that's the reason why, but toilets at the dead of night are exceptionally terrifying. The sound of water always dripping down from somewhere, and the light blue wall tiles along with the mirror next to the washstand scare me for no reason. But what scared me most of all --- were the three toilet stalls in the back. Their doors were all open, but I absolutely did not want to look inside.

As my thoughts drifted on such things, I started to worry about what was behind me. Delusions ran through my mind about a blue face staring at me from the toilet stall.

With tears in my eyes, I vehemently did my best to shake off the thought,

Emptying my mind, I desperately tried to think happy thoughts -- however, I still ended up recalling it. I recalled the story of a female student killing herself in a men's restroom during the summer vacation.

--Hey, that surely didn't happen here, right?

To begin with, the mysteriousness of a female student dying in the men's bathroom is eerie. It strangely stimulates my imagination about the darkness of the dead person's mind. Yoishi once said it as well. That the real ghost stories have a subtle lack of cohesion. There is a sense of discomfort in them, as if the important parts have been skipped, and the only thing that makes up for it is a theory based on the other side.

...You've gotta be kidding me.

Doesn't that mean it has all the ingredients for being the real deal?

I felt impatient at how long it was taking me to pee, and then proceeded to run out of the bathroom without even washing my hands. I ran straight down the corridor to reading room number one without looking back, relying on the light from my cell phone to guide me.

"Let's just hurry up and get this over with."

However, in front of reading room number one, when I thrust my hand in my pockets to take out the piece of paper Sako had given me, I realized. It was gone. The paper was gone.

"Dude, are you serious?"

Without that paper, what did I struggle all this way for?

Even when I turned both my pockets inside out, I found nothing. I checked every part my wallet. Nothing. Neither was it stuck anywhere in Kouhei Niijima's notebook. The only thing I could think of was that I dropped it somewhere. In the locker, or in the toilet.

And I really didn't wanna go back to the toilet.

I was alone and teary-eyed as I thought about it, when --

"I never get tired of watching you."

Hearing a sudden voice from behind me, I jumped.

"At that rate, you'll never have a boring life."

As I fell down, I looked behind me and saw -- Sako Takita.

His indigo blue kinagashi melded into the darkness, and his white face alone remained eerily visible. I don't know where he came from, but there he was, his smooth face had a smile of satisfaction as he held small penlight.

"W...why, are you...?"

"Why? I came because you refused, after all. Ahh, that window from reading room number four really helped, by the way. So that was thanks to you."

He spoke in in a relaxed manner, and held his hand out to me. I stood up to brush his hand away and yelled at him in a low-key manner, taking into consideration the fact that it was late at night, and we were trespassing.

"...W, what the hell?! If you could have done it yourself then why didn't you do it from the start?!"

"It's no joke, it would be best if you were the one to do it. Didn't I say it? I carry a heavy trace of the divine. There’s a high possibility I might end up purifying that important book."

"Oh, and about that. I wanted to ask you about that. Why is it a problem if the book is purified? Wouldn't it be better if that kind of dangerous book were to be purged from the earth?"

In reply, Sako looked at me with a look of disbelief.

"Wouldn't that be a complete waste?"

"Huh?"

"A book that kills you just by reading it, that's not a book that's created with ease. You need to have extensive knowledge and overflowing love for the curse of taboo words to be able to create it. It's in the highest order of magical artifacts, and it's a precious thing that the creator himself risked being affected by. Well, in fact, it might well mean that the creator is no longer alive."

…No longer… alive?

"Someone who used to be in this school. Someone of very intelligence, whose sense of right and wrong was distinctly different from that of normal humans. There's a psychiatric condition known as antisocial personality disorder, and the author of the book 'Rororo' is definitely someone who fits that description. Sometimes called predators, they appear in the world as lust killers, but you can never identify them by their appearance. In fact, they appear more normal than your average joe, and they blend in with their surroundings. As a general rule, they are very intelligent. They can be people of high social status who have attained respect in the world."

After all that rambling, Sako spoke in a hushed tone of voice:

"They have excessive self-esteem, and are self-centered. No remorse, no feelings of guilt, apathetic, no empathy. They are talkative and friendly at first glance, but they cannot take responsibility for their actions."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"A certain scholar proposed that these are all common statistical characteristics of people who have antisocial personality disorder. But well, after all, that's just their narrow definition."

Or rather, doesn't that description fit you to a T?

I thought I'd say that out loud, but thought better of it. But you know... if you were to remove the friendly part, I feel that Yoishi also fits that description. She was definitely not normal, but I didn't feel comfortable in calling her abnormal.

In any case, Sako put one hand in his pocket and started walking away.

“This school is distorted. Did that person create the book because it was distorted? Or did it become distorted with the appearance of that person? In all probability, I think it’s the former, but whatever the case may be, that book is dangerous. It's not something that should be kept in a library used by countless students for any length of time."

Saying that, he quickly disappeared inside reading room number one.

The university library was one of Koumei institutes’ oldest buildings, a massive stone structure with one basement and three floors above ground. Reading room number one was the largest reading room in the library, and according to Sako, the book made up of taboo words known as ‘Rororo’ was hidden in with the other books here somewhere.

I opened the wooden sliding door and entered inside to find the vast room dimly lit.

The eastern side was lined with windows, the curtains were all drawn, as was expected now that the building was closed. The center of the room was lined with long wooden tables, and the west and north sides were covered with high bookshelves that extended all the way to the ceiling. Fluorescent lamps hung from the tall ceilings, but if I had to guess, it was probably a dimly lit place even during the day. However, the reading tables had a warm light for each seat, which made it easier to concentrate on reading books.

"It seems like a pretty good place, doesn't it?"

Sako spoke in a carefree tone as he stroked his thin beard.

"Hey, let’s hurry up and get this over with!" I called out to Sako from behind, 'Please just wait', he replied. The somewhat unreliable priest and antiques dealer was excitedly shining his light on the bookshelves here and there.

"Oooh, they have 'The Hundred Headless Woman' by Ernst. There's

also ' A compendium of bizzare ghost literature from the Edo era' [28] by the national publication society. They even have 'The 120 Days of Sodom' by Sade. I wonder if there's anyone who understands the value of having such a collection in a private university. Say, would it be a bad idea if I quietly took a few of them after we've finished?"

"Don't ask me." I retorted, as I once again looked around at the giant stacks of bookshelves.

I took a deep breath. To tell the truth, I didn't dislike the atmosphere of the library. I don't read as many books as a bookworm might, but even so, I find my heart strangely calm when I'm surrounded by the scent of countless books. I was filled with emotion, a feeling of respect I had for the ocean of knowledge that stood neatly lined before me. Of course, there were many, many more books that existed in the world. And it was an amount that no human could ever read through in a lifetime. It was similar to the feeling I got when I thought about the universe. A feeling that reminded me of how utterly finite the nature of my existence was. And 'Rororo' was somewhere in this universe of books. A dangerous book, with dangerous taboo words planted all over its text, that would kill you if you read them. Some kind of psycho[29] purposely mixed in that cursed book with the other books in the library.

"---Well then."

I turned around hearing that to find Sako had shifted the table at the center of the room to make a space a few meters square. He was squatting there, taking out what looked like a small water bottle from his pocket and proceeded to gently sprinkle the place with water.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a barrier, for now."

He spoke as he switched to a seiza[30] posture, and moved his fingers in a practiced manner. As I watched his flowing gestures, I finally got the sense that he was indeed a priest. I couldn't help but feel the 'divinity' the guy spoke of.

Before long, his resonant words began to echo quietly in the reading

room.

They were ritual incantations[31]. As I listened to them, even my spine straightened, and the atmosphere around me turned somewhat solemn.

"Please take it."

After he finished his ritual incantations, Sako handed me another piece of paper. I took out my cellphone, switched on the flashlight and focused it on the paper to see: "Agyousansagyougo", words I couldn't make heads or tails out of.

"This sutra is one of the mantras of the Shingi Shingon sect[32] and is said to make it possible to see the strange and mysterious."

"You're a Shinto priest and yet, you're using sutras of the Shingon sect?"

Sako smirked at my sarcastic comment.

"Being bound to one religion is foolishness. If you were to ask me, religion is a form of science, the fruit of mankind's wisdom. I humbly bow down to what is effective, and I am not afraid to adopt it without restraint."

Ah, now I understand.

This guys' insincere nature seems to be borne from that.

"Now, come over here. Spread your legs as wide as your shoulders, relax, and please recite the words three times with your eyes slightly open. Eventually, you should be able to discern the wondrous 'Rororo' in your vision. In this dim forest of countless books, only that book should stand out as a white one."

Sako then took out a small black bag out from his pocket.

"Once you find the book, please place it inside this bag."

"Say...Does it really have to be me...?

"Of course. Didn't you hear me before?" Sako clicked his tongue, narrowed his eyes slightly and added: "Do you get it? When you find the book, you must absolutely not open it. You must not read even a single letter. If you do, it's because you're extremely weak-minded, and the taboo words will instantly take hold over you."

"Hey, don't scare me!"

"Well, even if anything happens, I'm right here. I'll deal with it right away, so please don't worry about it."

Sako smiled broadly as he spoke -- but I mean, this guy was completely untrustworthy.

That's what I thought, but I had originally sneaked into the library late at night to do it alone. I had no choice, so I strengthened my resolve and stood at the place Sako was pointing at. I stretched out my legs as I was told, took a deep breath and relaxed my body.

"It was three times, right?"

"Three times. Do it slowly… draw the letters in your mind one by one."

I took a deep breath once again, and spoke out those words three times. "Agyousansagyougo, Agyousansagyougo, Agyousansagyougo." After that I took a gulp, and examined my surroundings.

The deathly silence inside the room was deafening. Somewhere in the dimly lit room, I thought I heard a cracking sound, but it might have just been my imagination. I could feel my heart beating faster and faster. However, no matter how long I waited, and no matter how many bookshelves I looked around at, I couldn't see any white book standing out.

"Please recite it once more."

Being urged on by Sako, I recited it three times once more, 'Agyousansagyougo'.

But as before, I saw no change in my surroundings. The area

remained as dark as if ink was dissolved in water, with only the occasional sound of a car passing by echoing from somewhere in the distance.

Still, -- This unpleasant feeling, what is it...? It's as if I've somehow gotten lost on a different road. Like I've stepped into someone else's shoes without knowing -- and it was as if someone, somewhere was laughing at my actions. Thereupon, a giggling voice behind me literally did reach my ears.

I turned around to see it was Sako. His white face was becoming eerily distorted by the light of the penlight he had left on the desk.

"...Hey, what the hell are you laughing about?"

However, Sako's skinny body merely continued to shake slightly. The muffled laughter that echoed through the dimly lit reading room was both eerie and upsetting.

"Hey! Stop fucking kidding me!"

Sako spoke at long last.

"Why, you really are a nice person after all."

"The hell are you talking about?"

“Fujieda’s clean nature has produced an infinitely simple soul like yourself – Ah, please take it as a compliment. In the near future, I'll have to put together a study on the influence of climate and nature on the mind --- Ohh, we’re getting a good crowd.”

…Getting a good crowd – of what?

“For some reason, they gather here late at night.”

His voice had turned cold.

I could feel the muddy, stagnant air hanging over the area.

"To tell you the truth, I had another job here besides retrieving 'Rororo'."

Smiling like a puppet who had abandoned his emotions somewhere, Sako spoke:

"The job in question being... to exorcise them."

...To exorcise--Hey, it can't be!

There was something there at the place Sako was pointing at.

"...The students that killed themselves in this school."

At the same time he uttered those words --

I noticed the presence of countless people in the surrounding air.

The two of us should have been the only ones in the reading room, but now the presence of countless people could be felt.

The number of people were ten, twelve -- no, it was much more. About as many as there would be packed here during daytime. I couldn't see anyone, but what felt like countless sounds of breathing hung in the air.

"Well, would you look at that? I wonder if that hideously burnt woman committed self-immolation. That one drooling over there must have hanged himself. The girl with the wide cut in her neck there, she must have slit her neck with a knife -- hmmm, were you the one who died in the men's bathroom? Getting caught up in a love affair, you threw away your life; what a complete waste. Even though you had such a lovely face. Even though you had your whole life ahead of you."

As if he were addressing each of the dead individually, Sako's words unavoidably made them manifest inside my mind. All of them were wandering around me in a dense atmosphere, as if they were sorrowful, empty, and in general, painfully appealing for something.

"H-hey....What the hell did you do to me...?" My voice shook as I asked.

"In the first place, you shouldn't go around chanting words you don't know the meaning of."

Sako sneers with a smile. I glared back at him as if to say that he was the one who told me to do it -- when I saw that Sako's eyes were now shining bewitchingly. It was different from the faintly glowing eyes of Yoishi. It wasn't a ghost or something vague, but something clearly ominous -- That's right, it was like a fox spirit that lived on a different plane of this world.

"Regrettably, the number of ghosts here is just too great. That's why it would be quicker just to gather and exorcise them all in one go. Say, don't your shoulders feel better now? The feeling of something heavy being lifted off your neck? Doesn't your body feel slightly lighter now?"

I put my hand on my shoulder as he continued to ask me this.

At the same time, a deep regret took hold of me. Why the hell did I come to such a place this late at night? In spite of Krishna-san warning me that my mind was still in a period of rehabilitation, I was here with this guy who I trusted much lesser than Yoishi.

“To tell you the truth, the phrase is one of the mantras of the Mikkyo[33] lineage, it’s a sutra that unties the bond between a person and their guardian spirit. Look at the old man standing behind you right now. He’s your guardian spirit, the one that's been protecting you for so long.”

In a panic, I looked at the place Sako’s gaze landed at. However, I couldn’t see anything. I desperately strained my eyes, but all I could see was a stack of inconspicuous books appear in the dim darkness.

“You can’t see him? Well then, let me explain. He’s probably your ancestor from several generations ago. A man with very genteel wrinkles reflecting a life lived on the straight and narrow. But now, his wrinkles are contorted in sadness. He laments, ‘Why did you chant such a sutra?’ Regardless however, his figure is slowly fading away.”

“…H-hey!"

"Most ghosts aren't actually aware that they're dead, but they're aware of the fact that they've lost something very important. This

feeling of loss creates a void inside them. And thus, they try to fill that void with something. That is, in short: a physical body, and that's why they possess people who are on the same wavelength. However, the living have reliable guardian spirits by their side to protect them, so they can't possess anyone they wish. That's why, I apologize -- but I had to prepare a mere vessel with no guardian."

My breathing was becoming ragged. I couldn't clench my teeth.

So that's it. The vessel he's talking about -- is me.

"You end up sympathizing with everyone, that's why you fulfill the requirements of a high-quality vessel."

I tightly closed my tear-filled eyes.

Losing my guardian spirit, I had no one to blame but myself, as I gritted my teeth in desperation.

More so than the fact that I had been deceived by him, I hated myself for trusting him. With all my heart, I felt sorry towards my ancestor who had protected me for so long. It was the same terrible thing I did to Miiko. Without realizing I was receiving someone's kindness, I ended up repaying their kindness with ingratitude. I didn't change. I never learned from my mistakes. Yoishi said it in the coffee shop. The people of this country were originally prudent in their use of words. That the people in the present day used words too callously. And yet, I had ended up chanting words I didn't know the meaning of, just doing what I'd been told, an irredeemable goddamn idiot.

And yet still, Sako's cheerful voice reached me.

"Oh, so many have gathered already. I understand, you all want a body. You think you'll be able to escape the suffering if you only had a living body. Well, please don't be so hasty. Normally, one body per person would be preferable, but fortunately, the vessel present here is a truly outstanding one that once managed to call down wandering ghosts that filled the sky."

Dredging up my past wounds, Sako turned to face me once more, his lips contorted in a sneer.

"That's right, be it once or twice...It's all the same, isn't it?"

As that terrifyingly gentle voice was about to snap something inside me --

"So noisy."

In the dark world, that somewhat irritated voice echoed.

"The library is supposed to be a quiet place for reading."

That voice is...

The voice that sounds like a wind chime on a windless summer night...

--Yoishi.

I recalled her pale face in a strangely nostalgic way, but I just couldn't open my eyes right away. My knees were shaking with fear, and I was doing my best just to breathe. I couldn't even muster up the courage to move a single fingertip or eyelid. To begin with, what if I opened my eyes, and instead of Yoishi, I end up seeing something I shouldn't? Something creepy? It would definitely be all over for me then. That's when my mind, which had been muddy and in rehabilitation to begin with, would collapse.

"I've been listening to the conversation about mid-way through, and I'm wondering if you're really that stupid."

"....What?"

"It's troublesome, so I'll only say it once."

But in my dark world, where I had shut my eyes tightly--

That voice sounded somewhat kind.

"You being you, means your guardian spirit won't abandon you so

easily."

"No...but... I'd already chanted that thing that was like an incantation."

"That, was a lie."

"...A lie?"

"Everything's in reverse. That kind of sutra does not exist. 'Agyousansagyougo' is just a series of phonetic characters – without doubt, they were used as taboo words to destabilize your mind."

Hearing those words spoken in indifference, I slowly managed to open my tear-stained eyes.

Beyond the hazy darkness, her figure emerged.

Yoishi Mitsurugi… was there. With her long black hair, and doll-like beauty. Dressed in the dark uniform of the attached high school, she sat on the edge of a table, her pale face gazing quietly at me.

"Y…Yoishii…"

My voice was already a snotty, teary mess.

"B-by lie, do you mean…? Is my guardian spirit still there? I didn't commit a dishonor?"

Yoishi silently nodded in response.

"What do you mean by phonetic characters? What was it all about?"

Yoishi looked at me somewhat annoyed, and said:

"You still don't get it? 'Agyousan-sagyougo' simply means the third syllable of agyou and the fifth syllable of sagyou." [34]

…Huh?

The third syllable of 'agyou', and the fifth syllable of 'sagyou'…Huh?

"…Lies(uso)?"

I turned my gaze back towards Sako as I held my trembling knees, he was merely concerned with stifling his laughter.

“It’s what they call a nocebo effect.”

Yoishi stood up, and walked up to me.

“For example, being made to believe that a non-existent fire is burning your hand, resulting in a burn scar, or if you're blindfolded and given a light pain at the tip of your feet while being made to hear the sound of dripping water, you'll be made to think you're bleeding and you'll really die. It's a psychological phenomenon where the body manifests what the mind believes -- an elaborately constructed 'taboo word'."

"Just as I expected."

Sako's voice was mixed in with laughter as he spoke:

"I was so close."

I was completely befuddled. I mean, how much of it all was a lie? I understood that the story about the incantation making my guardian spirit leaving me was a lie, but was the ominous presence that hung over the reading room just my imagination? No, more so than that, what about the book that kills you if you read it: 'Rororo'? And what about the guy who killed himself, Kouhei Niijima? Was it all, just a part of Sako's lie?

I asked in a trembling voice to Yoishi, who was staring at her surroundings -- and then her eyes began to shine, as if she had just noticed it for the first time.

"There's a lot of them. So many."

That somewhat happy look on her face -- it made me shudder in horror.

"...H-hey, Yoishi. I don't get it. Explain it to me properly."

I took out the notebook I had stuffed in my back pocket and held it out. I opened the notebook Kouhei Niijima had left behind in front of

Yoishi.

"It was just like you said. The guy who wrote that memo -- Kouhei Niijima, he was dead. He was just...interested in this girl here in the library. He was just in love. Why did he end up killing himself? Isn't the cause this 'Rororo' book this asshole's been talking about? Isn't that why there are so many suicides in this school?"

Taking in the torrent of questions with her dark eyes, Yoishi opened the pages of Kouhei Niijima's notebook that I held out to her, starting from the beginning. Tucked inside were the two notes that I had first found torn up. While Yoishi read them with the light from her phone, I scowled at Sako's white face as much as humanly possible. It's scary that there are ghosts here, but it's even scarier that this guy was trying to bring them all down on me. I mean, is this guy a sociopath? Or a living demon? I glared at his white face with such thoughts, but Sako merely wore a thin smile on his white face and waited patiently for Yoishi to finish reading the note.

"...Hmmm."

Eventually, Yoishi muttered out loud, so I quickly asked her:

"Look, I need an explanation that makes sense. Did you get it? Why did Kouhei Niijima die? And what the hell was he trying to tell me? That 'Rororo' thing he muttered about, that's the 'Rororo' book, right?"

Yoishi stared at Sako. Sako shrugged his shoulders slightly, and after that, she stared at me. Finally, she spoke in a voice that sounded like she was making fun of me.

"You really are so naive."

"...What the hell are you saying?"

"That's why you were conveniently used as a catalyst."

"T-this bastard!"

--Yeah, I know already. I know it so well it makes me sick to my stomach. And I'm sorry for my stupidity. Even a fool like me finally

understood that this bastard Sako was trying to bring out the countless things here by using me as bait. However, the problem was the original reason for the sticky air in the reading room, which was making it hard to breath even for someone like me, who couldn't see ghosts. Why does this school have such a closed-off air about it? How did a guy like Kouhei Niijima end up committing suicide? Was it all because of the book called 'Rororo'? And like Sako said, was there really some sort of crazy psychopath who wrote that book?

When I asked, Yoishi silently shook her head.

"That's not it."

"...What?"

"What you don't seem to realize is that this person was, after all, the second one to use you."

--Huh?

"Well, that's true." Sako gave a complacent smile once again.

"I said it, didn't I? Being possessed once or twice, It's all the same."

...Huh? Hey! What the hell are these two maniacs talking about? Once or twice is the same? I don't get any of it. Or should I say... I'd always assumed Yoishi was my ally, but was that really the case? Isn't she herself, like Sako, a walker in the depths of darkness? Wasn't she the type of person who never read the situation and would expose everything, no matter how cruel the truth might be? In the midst of this darkness being surrounded by the presence of countless creepy presences, isn't it just that the number of demons that I thought was only one has now grown to two? Ah -- that's what it looks like. The glow in Yoishi's dark eyes is growing. From now on, she's going to spout some decisive words. And those words will undoubtedly crush the foundation of the reality I believe in. They'll turn everything upside down.

"Y-Yoishi, wai--"

Wait, wait a second.

I was about to say -- but...

Yoishi's large eyes widened, and with an expression of ecstasy, and one without mercy, she declared it out loud:

"You've already been possessed for a long time."

"...Ugh."

I groaned out loud. Yoishi's words caused an intense surge of vomit to rise from the pit of my stomach. Now I became aware of a heaviness in my body that I hadn't noticed for a long time.

"It's... It's really him then? Kouhei Niijima?"

"No."

With a bewitching light in her eyes, Yoishi shook her head.

"A far, far more wicked ghost than him."

The reading room, which was already dimly lit, seemed to grow even darker.

The ground shook violently. My footing suddenly became unsteady. I desperately put strength into my lower body to cling to the world of the living. I grit my teeth, trying not to get caught up in the rapidly intensifying atmosphere of the world beyond.

"Just now, you said that the deceased Kouhei Niijima was in love."

"....W-what about that?"

"What kind of person was she?"

"What kind -- It's written right there, isn't it? She was tall, intellectual, shoulder-length hair, a bookworm --"

"Where does it say that?"

"..."

"This notebook has no description of any woman."

I felt a rush of goosebumps at her words. I recalled the uncontrollable presence inside me that had once thrust me down into the depths of terror.

"What...are you saying...?"

"The depiction of the girl that took shape inside your mind unnoticed -- that is the real form of 'Rororo'."

All of a sudden--

□□□□□□□□□□□□.....

I definitely heard those voices. A series of countless, muffled human voices. And, I already knew what they were saying. It was – 'Rororo'. Each and every one of them were muttering in unison with their mouths: 'Rororororororororororororororo', like a prayer to Buddha[35].

Someone – somewhere, was laughing.

It was the thing clinging to the old woman in the clock tower, the one that took the name of Miiko and lived with me, the one that stared at me through the frosted glass in the club building, and the one who jumped off the school building and disappeared -- Those countless fuzzy fragments of memory melted at that moment, and were reconstructed into the coffee shop on that rainy day, with the tall girl quietly reading a book.

Now, in this microcosm of the library, it was just me and the slender girl. In a space surrounded by bookshelves, the girl was sitting a little further away, simply staring at me. Her shoulder-length hair swayed slightly. Her white face, devoid of any expression. And her eyes, which had seemed so intelligent, looked like mere holes. She continued to stare at me with those eyes that were like dark, bottomless wells.

Those eyes were nothing but darkness.

An entrance to a world that, once peeked into, could never be left again. And the second I felt as if I saw something beyond the darkness ---

“Hey, are you feeling scared right now?"

Yoishi asked me.

“Is this scary?”

Yoishi asked with her pale, shapely face drawn so close to mine that our noses were almost touching.

The expression on her face - her eyes – she was in pure ecstasy. I'm sure this is how excited Schliemann must have felt when he finally found the ruins of Troy, which had never left the realm of legend.

With that monstrous look on her face, as if she was about to eat me --- I finally became convinced.

I can't do it. I can't stay with her. To be near the girl named Yoishi Mitsurugi, is to stand face to face against the world beyond.

However, Yoishi looked around and shouted with glee.

“It’s all going crazy! Everything in this school is going perfectly, completely, 100% crazy!”

With eyes wide open and an ecstatic look on her face, she declared to no one in particular.

“J-just stop it already!”

I shouted and tried to push her away, when –

Something began to fall down.

The universe collapses, the bookshelves collapse, and a terrific amounts of books collapse. Works of Stendhal, Shakespeare, Ozaki Kōyō and Maeterlinck, dance in the air – Les Miserables, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, Iliad and The Gold-Bug, all dance. The mushy dogma in countless other books I'd never read was raining down

incessantly like a stream of internal organs. The ceiling collapsed, giving way to an open gray sky, but even that sky ruptured. Countless books, a rain of words, poured down in a torrent aimed right at me. However, the polished, well-crafted words of those countless authors were somehow distorted. As soon as I noticed that the polished words had lost their original luster, had turned reddish-black and reeked of decay, I felt a surge of gastric juices well up inside my stomach. In this world where I couldn't tell night from day, nor which planet I was on, I perceived the truth of the things that kept falling to and rebounding from the ground in succession. They weren't books. They weren't words. They were countless fish. They were frogs, nails, and pieces of meat. They were old coins, and birds with whitish feathers. All of them were squashed by the impact of the fall, staining the ground in red. Corpses. Corpses. Corpses. Corpses. Corpses. Corpses – Only corpses that had finished their lives rained down to fill the entire horizon. Decomposing into blood, flesh, and bodily fluids, all signs of life had disappeared. One after another, they continued to explode at my feet, as if to declare that living things are nothing but sacks of blood. That graphic and thunderous sound continued to ring out.

In that nightmarish world on the verge of collapse – someone's mere laughter continued to echo.

Did that laughter belong to the person who had set up 'Rororo' in this room? Was it Yoishi? I didn't know anymore. In this warped world, countless voices kept reverberating. I heard someone's scream from somewhere, and the moment I realized it was my voice –

"Shall we leave?"

A sharp voice rang out, and my arm was grabbed by Sako's cold hand.

At the same time, I started running like crazy. I had no idea where I was running to. At any rate, I must have gone back the way I came, running out of reading room number one onto the floor and down the corridor. But I'd like to think that the thing I saw when I ran out of the reading room number one was a hallucination caused by my clouded consciousness. In Yoishi's hands, running right behind me, was an old black book. And, as if trying to snatch back that book, a

long white arm stretched out from the darkness.

○

The next thing I knew, I was in the courtyard of the university, beneath the radiant moonlight.

I was standing there, pumping oxygen into my lungs as hard as I could. My knees hurt like hell, probably because I hit them hard on the corner of the table when I left. While rubbing my knee, I continued to repeat the process of filling my lungs with fresh oxygen and expelling it. I felt as if I had just completed an underwater dive, probably because I had been unconsciously holding my breath the whole time. I think that was because I felt like I was letting something nasty into my body just by breathing while in the library.

"…"

I thought I heard a muffled voice close to me, and when I slowly turned around, there was something there. At first, I thought it was a black garbage bag, but it was a human being. Sitting on the bare ground, looking miserable with their head dropped down.

"Y—Yoishi…?"

The figure looked up slightly at my voice.

Her long hair moved smoothly, and her pale face stood out under the moonlight. Yoishi Mitsurugi looked absentminded, as she turned her beautiful, cold face like that of a western doll towards me. And then, moving her lips slightly, she said:

"It got taken."

"…Huh?"

"That book. Even though I was the one who found it."

Those words finally brought me back to my senses, and I looked

around in a panic.

In the pitch-dark university courtyard, there was only silence; Not a single person in sight. Besides the sound of insects chirping from somewhere, it was intensely quiet.

“What happened to that kinagashi wearing bastard?”

Yoishi looked at me as if she were clicking her tongue.

“He vanished.”

“Vanished?”

“Like I told you, he stole the black book from me and left somewhere.”

…T-T-that foxy bastard.

He's the type of guy who scares people to death, and when he gets what he wants, he says goodbye with no explanation. Isn’t he an adult? Isn’t he supposed to be a fully-fledged member of society? Is he really worthy enough to be Krishna-san’s mentor? I was shaking my dizzy head and moaning bitterly out loud at the same time, “That’s right”, Yoishi said, agreeing with me.

“It's so deplorable to rob a girl of a book she hasn't read. He should have at least asked if he could borrow it after I’d finished reading it. It's really irritating when he said, ‘Adieu’, and left."

“No, about that...”

I interjected, being as fed up as I was.

“You’d die if you read it, okay? Even If you've already got one foot in the world beyond, you'd get dragged there in the blink of an eye.”

Yoishi silently turned her dark eyes to me. As expected, her expression seemed to be saying, ‘What's the problem with that?’ I sighed and asked her once again:

“Well anyway, you helped me out back there – but, why were you

there in the first place?”

“Why, you ask? I was reading, of course.”

“No, it was dark. I mean, the library was already closed.”

Yoishi stood up unsteadily. She lightly brushed the dust off her skirt and walked feebly through the dimly lit courtyard toward the main gate.

“I was in there since lunchtime, trying to read a book.... When I finally opened the book, I couldn't concentrate. The thoughts that were stuck in my head were interfering with my thinking, and each letter in the book looked like nothing more than a pattern. I had no choice but to continue reading, and before I knew it - I fell asleep.”

“Y-you fell asleep?”

“It was quite a deep sleep, actually.”

“No…just wait a minute. You were asleep all that time? From noon till now -- in there?”

Yoishi nodded in silence.

…No, ughh. What’s up with the security in this library? You mean to tell me they just locked up the facility even when there was a person asleep on the reading chair? What about the entry record? What was the point of me going to all the trouble of sneaking in without leaving a trace? And having to endure the urge to urinate for so long in the locker?

“I woke up a few times, but I hadn't been sleeping well lately, so I figured it was fine. But then, just as I was getting the deepest sleep I'd had in a long time, you guys started making a racket.”

Yoishi muttered somewhat resentfully, but there was still something persistent that was bothering this girl. So that’s why she didn't notice anything when I was having such a scary time? Oh, that’s right. After all, ghosts being everywhere is normal for this girl’s world, and I don't know what it is, but her problems are probably all that matter to her in that world. Other problems are just trivial to her. I guess she

just happened to wake up and saw me there, teary-eyed and upset.

I thought that as I glared at the back of Yoishi, who was walking ahead of me in a daze.

It’s a characteristic of the antisocial personality disorder Sako spoke of. I think it was about having excessive self-esteem, being self-centered and a lack of empathy, or something like that. It's a trait that fits perfectly with the psycho that went to the trouble of putting a book in the library that was made up of those taboo words, and it's a trait that’s terribly true of Sako himself -- But still, in some respects it reminds me of this black-haired girl walking right in front of me.

“That’s the definition espoused by Robert D. Hare, isn’t it?”

Yoishi suddenly stopped in her tracks and looked back.

Damn it. It seems I unconsciously muttered it out loud. Slightly embarrassed, I asked: “You know about it?”

Yoishi nodded, and added:

“Indeed, every single aspect of that definition applies to me.”

I was at a loss for words when she easily admitted it to me.

“I’ve always felt constantly inconvenienced by the insular atmosphere of this school.”

“No…you see...”

I cleared my throat and tried to change the subject.

“I don't know if it was a sociopath or what, but is it true that there was such a dangerous person in this school after all? And did they put a strange book in our library? Why did they do that? What was their objective?”

Yoishi looked at me closely and then… asked me:

“Do you really want to know?”

Her pale face stood out under the pouring moonlight, and it terrified me—

Behind Yoishi, I watched the night sea spread out endlessly.

The boundary between the sky and the horizon is unclear, an infinite world spreads out in darkness.

And somewhere in that limitless expanse, an unfathomable presence lay hidden.

The incomprehensible - people sometimes call it the occult. I've always been thrilled by the transcendental atmosphere of ghosts, UMAs[36], and out of place artifacts[37], but this time, for the first time, I had terrible goosebumps at the very thought of human beings. It was fear of an act more twisted than what the word "prank" could even begin to cover: Mixing in a book that would kill you if you read it amongst ordinary books.

For example, digging a small pit on a snowy day to lure your friends in. I used to do that when I was a kid. It was fun, and I used to roar with laughter when my friends fell in. But that didn’t have an iota of murderous intent. It's because I wanted to see my fallen friend jump out with a smile on his face. I couldn’t possibly imagine it my heart pounding in excitement at the possibility of someone dying.

That's what I was thinking, when –

“Predator, serial killer, antisocial personality disorder. Those words are just labels.” Yoishi muttered in a whisper.

“It's easy to dismiss them as abnormal but, statistically speaking, in every age, there's always been at least one person in every class who has a desire to destroy the status quo. The fact that the probability of their appearance does not decrease in any era has even led to a belief among some who think it is a manifestation of population control genes. People who hold thoughts beyond comprehension are simply classified and tagged as such by those around them."

"No, I don't know about tags and labels, but that's still not normal. Laughing at other people's misery, doing all that just for the fun of it, that's--"

Suddenly, it hit me.

No...no. Isn't that the true nature of human beings?

Haven't humans always been irredeemable, self-righteous creatures filled with malice? I recalled the arrogance of the human species in removing the reproductive functions from their pets for their own convenience, something I had thought about during the Miiko incident. At the same time, my conscience began to denounce me for my own past mistake. The mistake of abandoning the proposal I had made after being broken hearten, 'Look who's talking', it mocked.

"That's right."

Yoishi nodded slightly.

"People are selfish, but they also have a hypocritical mental circuit known as a conscience, which subconsciously creates a sense of atonement for the things they have trampled upon. It can be said that this creates ghosts in the minds of people in every generation. And perhaps the taboo words embedded in the book 'Rororo' have the function of raising that negative circuit to the extreme. Those who read it would be caught unaware and endlessly be made to believe that their lives have no worth, and finally, their own conscience would kill them."

Yoishi kept muttering such things in a detached manner, but --

I realized, after all this time...

"Huh--Wait a second! What, what about me? Is that thing gone? You said I'd been possessed for a long time, right? It's gone already, right?"

Yoishi just stared at me with her emotionless eyes--

And abruptly turned away and started walking again.

"...Hey. Just wait a second. You're not going to deny it?"

As I stared at Yoishi's distant figure, I realized something even more important.

Come to think of it, I had, without warning, ended up seeing that girl in that coffee shop, and without being dragged into something by Yoishi. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can clearly imagine the entire shape of her face behind my eyelids. If she was a ghost, then that means... it can't be--

"It can't be…"

My feet stopped moving then and there. I desperately clapped my knees, which were about to collapse, but I couldn't take one more step. The dark sea of night behind Yoishi immersed my feet. The rough sound of the waves enveloped me from somewhere.

"It can't be, does that mean... that I've been able to see ghosts for some time now...?"

If you hang out with a psychic, your ability to sense the supernatural will strengthen. Krishna-san once said that the ill-natured feeling of 'knowing' makes people connect with the world beyond. So, does that mean that since I arrived to Tokyo and went to places with Yoishi Mitsurugi, that I've become tinged with her strong magnetism relating to ghosts, is that what it means?

"There's one thing I forgot to mention."

From the darkness beyond, came Yoishi's voice.

Looking up wearily, in the dim darkness up ahead, the unearthly shadow spoke in a voice that sounded like a wind chime.

"There's something I misunderstood."

"...Huh?"

"Their world always surpasses my imagination, and the more I peek into it, the more I realize the depth of its darkness. Their words are muffled and incoherent, and I couldn't understand them no matter

how many times I heard them."

--So, what does that mean?

"Now that I know, it doesn't make things any better, but - the word that dead young man was muttering was not 'Rororo'."

--Stop it! Don't listen to her anymore! Cover your ears and get away from this girl right now! Before I could even react to the warning coming from the back of my mind, her voice filled with ecstasy reached my ears.

"It wasn't 'Rororo', it was --- 'Run away'."[38]

With those words spoken with joy—

Yoishi walked off into the darkness. My feet were stuck as if sewn to the ground, and I stared at her disappearing figure for what seemed like forever. For an instant, I caught a glimpse of what I thought was the emaciated dead clinging to Yoishi's back with their thin hands -- I quickly rubbed my eyes.

Alone, I stood there, petrified, even as the darkened university building came back into view.

Suddenly, I felt a sense of relief as the strength drained from my body. I knew the truth behind this numbing feeling of pleasure, it was as if I had finally overcome a deadly threat to my life.

"How absurd…"

I whispered, my voice quivering.

The idea that she and I were war comrades was downright absurd.

Right now, from the bottom of my heart, I was... truly relieved that

Yoishi had disappeared from my sight.

But the ground I was standing on was a gentle slope. And I knew was that if I made any mistakes from here on, the slope would become irreversibly steep.

“I can’t… do this anymore.”

I tell myself, wiping the tears from my eyes with both hands.

She and I were confronting completely different things. I selfishly believed I had finally understood her, but I had completely failed to grasp her true nature. After all is said and done, Yoishi and I were two beings who lived in worlds that could never intersect. I still had my feet firmly planted in this world, and even if I plant one foot in the other side, she already stands with both feet there.

It’s not… too late.

If I continue walking with her, the path ahead will surely lead to the world beyond. I'm not prepared for that yet. I still want to live in the warmth of this world.

I turned to face the direction opposite from where Yoishi had disappeared, and kept on running without looking back.

Epilogue

“……..Huh?”

I opened the door to the club room and saw—

Krishna-san and Sako were locked in an embrace. The two of them were huddled together in the middle of the club room, with the tall Sako completely wrapped around the smaller Krishna.

For a moment I was at a loss of words, moreover, I felt so agitated that I even lost myself.

“…S, s, sorry for intruding!”

Flustered, I closed the door and leaned against the concrete wall of the hallway, repeatedly pumping oxygen into my lungs. Shaking my burning head, I tried to shake off the sight I had just witnessed, but it wasn't going to happen.

--Why is Krishna-san and that guy…?

The reason I came here was to once again declare my intention to part ways with Yoishi to Krishna-san. I was there to say that I finally understood that it was like playing an impossibly hard video game for me to get involved with her. And I would also take the opportunity to report Sako’s actions: how that bastard tricked me into going to the library late at night, and at the end, how he tried to turn me into some kind of vessel for countless somethings.

However, all such feelings ended up vanishing in an instant.

That's how confused I was by what I just saw. Two people hugging in a club room in broad daylight…that means, it’s that sort of thing? Did they cross the line between teacher and student? Oh my god, I’m such an ignorant dullard. When I think about it, it's pretty remarkable

that Krishna-san, who's extremely weak at dirty talk, would go to Aomori for an overnight stay. She even told me that she had been peeked on in the bath, that means it was that sort of relationship all along. In fact, Krishna-san is an unmarried, fully-fledged woman who will turn twenty-one this year. It's not surprising that she might have a boyfriend or two. But – despite all that, be it the benefactor who saved her life -- of all people, it had to be that guy?

I slumped down in the hallway, dumbfounded, unable to think of anything else.

What is this feeling of emptiness?

Where was the wind that blew through my chest coming from? And where was it headed?

No, the problem was not the wind. It was the hole the wind was blowing through. What was it, I wondered, that had gouged out my chest? In my mind, Yoishi had gone over to the darkness. She had a certain cuteness about her despite that, but still, I couldn't follow her to the other side. I didn't have that resolve. I managed to fill that void by thinking of Krishna-san's smile.

I could immediately imagine her as a child, with that immature, lovely and innocent face. Her big eyes and the sparkling light of innocence within. Whenever she got angry or upset, her smooth hair would bob up and down and a nice scent would always tickle my nose. Ah… she was always an angel. She was my guardian angel. That she should fall into the hands of that demonic, monstrous fox-like guy-- is this the bitterness of life? Is this what you would call absurdity? At that moment, I thought I heard a voice saying, 'Hey, you there,' but I must have been imagining it.

"…I guess I'll quit."

I mutter to myself, and finally make up my mind.

"That's right, I was only let into the Beatnik research society when I forcefully tried to get in, I wasn't admitted as a staff member of Ikaigabuchi. That was, after all, because Krishna-san didn't wholeheartedly agree with me joining. My fervent speech back then

inadvertently influenced that kind person, and that's how things ended up this way. I'm a heavy burden to her, and hardly any help. Even though she told me to stay away from Yoishi, I totally ended up getting involved with her anyway, three incidents in a row, starting from the 'The Clock Tower', 'The Cat Monster', and 'Rororo'. And on top of that, I've been targeted by some kind of troublesome ghost that I don't understand. I... really am an irredeemable..."

"Hey, you there."

I thought I heard that voice again, but I failed to recognize anything with my ears as well as my eyes. I was so devastated by the enormity of what I had lost, and furthermore, I even lost sight of the path that should have been right in front of me, but regardless, the voice continued.

"Hey, I'm speaking to you, the one wearing the misspelled English T-shirt slumped in the hallway. I don't know what happened, but please cheer up. I've been there, too. At your age, you've probably got more problems than you can handle, but they're usually not a big deal when you look at them with a calm head. Why don't you try and act a little more dignified?"

"....."

I vacantly raise my face to see that the door to the Beatnik research room was open, and there, holding a drooping Krishna-san in his left hand looking down on me with a grin was Sako Takita.

"Y-you..."

"Save the greetings for later, Yamada Nagito-kun. Say, could you rearrange those chairs over there for a minute? Kurimoto-kun needs to be laid down."

"L-laid down? What are you going to do after laying her down? What kind of nerve do you have to make me help you with something like that right now?"

Sako gave me a cold gaze, and then breathed a deep sigh.

"You really are a fool. Can't you tell just by looking? Or are you

someone so heartless without even a shred of compassion to help out someone who's done so much for you? Kurimoto-kun is unconscious. Can't you see that I'm asking for your help?"

At those words--

I stood up in a panic. And finally understood the situation.

"K-Kishna-san!? You lost consciousness? Wai--What happened? Please, stay with us!"

"Oh, she'll be fine. She just got a little shocked and will probably wake up soon. More importantly, you'd better set up some chairs over there, so she can have a place to lie down."

I did as I was told and ran into the club room, setting up a simple bed-like space by lining up a pipe chair and some other chairs. Sako easily carried Krishna-san in his arms and gently laid her down there.

"Sako, What the hell happened?"

"Well, it's a long story -- but I guess it's because she saw something unbelievable."

"Something...unbelievable?"

With those words--

In the humid club room where the cicadas were still chirping noisily, something chilly rose up.

"It's this."

In Sako's hands, there was an old, worn out photograph.

Was it possibly some kind of creepy ghost photograph? I braced myself -- but, what Sako was holding out was a perfectly normal photograph. A scene cut out from somewhere on campus. A picture of two high school girls huddled close together in front of a large tree. A petite girl and a long, slender girl are smiling as they stand shoulder to shoulder. I don't have to strain my eyes to see it. The petite girl was Krishna-san. A shy smile peeked out from behind her red glasses,

dressed in the Koumei high school uniform, she was looking this way.

But, the other girl.

The moment I saw her, my blood froze.

--It's her.

The girl I had seen in the coffee shop -- tall, intelligent, with the beautiful face. Her hair around shoulder-length, her eyes had a strong light in them, and her lips were shaped in a mature smile.

"Hey, hey, hey, Sako! It's her. She's the one I saw!"

I excitedly pointed at the picture.

"You and Yoishi both scared me into thinking that this girl was a ghost that only existed in my mind -- but look! She really does exist. Hahahaha. I knew it. The girl I met at the coffee shop didn't look like a ghost at all. She has legs, and a shadow....Just like in this picture, she was wearing the Koumei school uniform, and quietly reading a book in the coffee shop, and--"

"N-no way!"

At that moment, a nostalgic angry voice sounded directly below me.

“T…There’s no way you could have met her! There’s no way… you could have met that person—"

Startled, I looked down to see the petite occult website manager feebly glaring at me.

“Krishna-san! You regained consciousness?”

“---I’m fine. More importantly, did you really see that person?”

Looking pale as she dragged half of her body up to the chair, Krishna-san asked me as I reached out to her.

“….U..Uhhh. I’m sure of it.”

“--What about Yoishi? Was she nearby?”

“U…ummmm…”

Letting out a deep breath at the sight of me, Krishna-san laid back down again with a heave and folded her hands over her face.

“Even after I told you not to get involved with Yoishi Mitsurugi, yet you…”

“Actually, I came here today to tell you that. From now on, I’m never gonna meet Yoishi—"

“It's already too late.”

She spoke plainly and dismissively, then proceeded to ask Sako while peeking through her fingers.

“Takita-san, what should be done now?”

“Well then…”

Saying that, Sako turned to me with a faint smile on his face.

“First of all, Let's start with a very fundamental contradiction that it seems you haven't noticed. Listen here, Yamada Nagito-kun. Take a good look at this picture once again, and see if you notice anything.”

“…Huh?”

“In this photo, the two high school girls look to be on good terms. And as you can see, on the left is Kurimoto-kun. She is now a university student, and she is wearing a high school uniform in this photo. Unless your shrewd understanding leads you to believe that Kurimoto-kun has a hobby of cosplaying, you would know that this photo is from the past, right? Yes, to be precise, this photo was taken five years ago, right here within the Koumei educational institution.”

“…Five years ago?”

That number brought back an unpleasant memory.

As I recall, five years ago—

Didn't this bastard once say that Krishna almost broke down once?

“That’s right.”

Sako smiled, his long, slitted eyes narrowing like a thread.

“And this tall girl smiling next to Kurimoto-kun… immediately after this picture was taken, she ended up mysteriously disappearing from this school.”

“…Huh?”

“She disappeared without a trace. Without even leaving a body behind, her bag was left in the classroom, and she never even went home. School officials, friends, neighbors, police, and the mass media all tried desperately to find her at the time, but there was still no sign of whether she was alive or dead. That’s right, she literally vanished from the face of the earth, as if she had been spirited away by the gods[39]. Even now, after five years, she still falls in the category of ‘being actively searched for’ -- but if we think about it realistically, it would be more natural to assume that she is already dead.”

Those words made me feel a nebulous chill, like something cold was creeping at my feet.

“But, I mean, uh, look – there’s all sorts of high school students, right?”

I spoke, trying to chase away the creeping feeling.

“Maybe there was some guy she was going out with and she ran away with him or something, or maybe some bad guy tricked her or--”

“Of course, such a possibility was taken into account at the beginning of the search. But she didn't have any boyfriends at the time, and her purse, pencil case and other stationery were not missing. Even the shoes she used to go to school with still remained in the shoe rack at the entrance.”

“Then she must still be somewhere in this school, right? Maybe she's locked up somewhere that's hard to find, and is still waiting for hel

__”

I was about to say that much, when I finally realized. Five years. Five years have already passed. If this girl was looking for help somewhere – then it was unlikely that she would be still be alive.

“It seems you finally understand. Every inch of this school has already been searched, and even the police dogs failed to find anything. To sum it all up, realistically and scientifically speaking, her physical body doesn’t exist here anymore.”

Sako’s words–

And that seemingly happy, warped, white face of his - reminded me of something. Words that distort my stance, the darkness that spreads behind those eyes and shakes the foundations of what I believe.

Yes – it reminded me of Yoishi Mitsurugi.

It was the same feeling of something shaking and slipping away, just like when that black-haired girl talked about ghosts.

“A girl that shouldn’t be here anymore, and you…where did you meet, I wonder? Even If the girl who disappeared five years ago is still alive somewhere, what are the chances that she's still wearing the uniform she wore back then? How likely is it that a girl of this generation, growing mature every day, would still look exactly the same as she did back then?”

Aah, it’s getting darker.

The world, now, is becoming ever darker. Sako’s words, and his empty eyes, gripped my heart coldly, and his thin, smiling face appeared like a monster fox on a moonless night.

--Antisocial Personality Disorder.

Suddenly, the word comes up in my mind again.

I don’t know if that word is correct or not. But right now, the person called Sako Takita, was an inexplicable existence to me. He was well versed in all kinds of mantras, an advanced user of taboo words, a

half-hearted guy, a liar, and yet, he was also a calculating man who worked everything to his advantage. And despite all of this, I never felt any sense of responsibility from the man himself. He was an incomprehensible monster that I sincerely hoped to never see again.

“I don't really want to push you too hard right now, but...”

Sako waved the photo in his hand and spoke:

“For the record, this photo was supposed to have been burnt up five years ago.”

“……”

“I was sure Kurimoto-kun had properly extinguished it from the world. But for some reason, it was once again discovered in the club room. I believe that Kurimoto-kun's mind, which is stronger and more graceful than most people's, couldn't stand to do it, because this slender girl and Kurimoto-kun had a rather special relationship.”

He spoke happily, and then:

“Say, Yamada-kun… Yamada Nagito-kun.”

Sako handed me the photo.

“What happened to this girl five years ago -- and where is she right now?”

In a world where I slowly bleed away.

The mature girl in the photo smiles quietly.

In the clock tower. In the eyes of the cat. In the club room at dawn. And, in the coffee shop –

That hazy figure, standing lurched over, was right now… in front of me.

The girl sneers. She turns her deep hollow eyes towards me and moves her red mouth.

Enshrouded in the scent of the world beyond—

She declares:

--A t l a s t, w e m e e t...

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Afterword

Around the time I was writing this afterword, a heavy snowstorm hit the Kanto area. The trains stopped, the Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway was closed, and the capital was harshly criticized for being weak and not used to snow by many people, and in a panic, I too rushed out to buy a shovel to shovel the snow! However, it had been a long time since we've had snow, so snow shovels were sold out of everywhere.

By the time they finally filled up the stock a few days later, both my appetite for buying them, as well as the snow, disappeared. But I realized an obvious fact: The value of an item comes from the fact that it is there in a time of need.

I first learned about the mysterious ‘Fafrotskies’ phenomenon from the movie ‘Magnolia’. The first time I saw that famous last scene, I felt physical disgust and a strange sense of relief at the same time, the reason for which was that the impossible phenomenon was the rain of salvation that was needed by many characters to wash away their hopeless conflicts in life. And, once again, I felt as if I had been taught a lesson by the snow. Of course, this is my own subjective view.

Now, this volume, "Melting Fafrotskies" is the first volume of two volumes, and will be followed by the second volume, "Shrinking Fafrotskies" which will be released soon. This story was supposed to be a one-volume story, but it ended up being expanded entirely because of my lack of skill, However, the editor in charge, Katsushi Ota-san was very helpful:

“You can take your time! Let's go for two volumes!”

It is also true that those words helped me. Thank you very much! If I may say so, there is a certain secret connected in both volumes, so I would be delighted if you could remember the story of "Melting" until

the release of the second volume. And once again, Yoshitoshi Abe-san provided us with wonderfully painted illustrations. I can't tell you how much power the illustrations gave me in these short paragraphs, but please let me treat you to another delicious cup of coffee! Thank you very much! And to everyone who has read this far. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. There would be no greater happiness than to meet you again in “Shrinking Fafrotskies”.

January 2013

Ninomae Hajime

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Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ Whirlwinds accompanied by rain which also drops strange objects such as fish
2. ↑ Unidentified mysterious animal
3. ↑ Japanese slang which means psychic receiver of signals. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denpa
4. ↑ The Japanese expression used here literally means ‘the ghost, when examined closely, is withered silver grass'
5. ↑ For more info: https://japanthis.com/2017/11/30/kura-japanese-storehouse/
6. ↑ : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubasute)
7. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bakeneko
8. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wakan_Sansai_Zue
9. ↑ :https://books.google.com.sa/books?id＝9pk-CgAAQBAJ&pg＝PA100&lpg＝PA100&dq＝Saga＋no＋yozakura&source＝bl&ots＝MkQu2mo0OB&sig＝ACfU3U36iiCDjGQ%20no%20yozakura&f＝false
10. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bakeneko)
11. ↑ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nekomata)
12. ↑ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat-s%C3%ACth)
13. ↑ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasha_(folklore)
14. ↑ (https://yokai.fandom.com/wiki/Gotokuneko)
15. ↑ Kinkabyou(Golden flower cat)
16. ↑ Traditional Japanese pattern. http://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/h/hanabishimonyou.htm_)
17. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kosode
18. ↑ https://www.japanese-wiki-corpus.org/culture/Uchikake.html
19. ↑ https://www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2015/8/17/traditional-japanese-style-weddings
20. ↑ This is a sumo term meaning to slap your hands in front of your opponent's face to confuse him. In this case it’s also a pun because neko actually means cat in Japanese.

21. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotodama
22. ↑ A place in Tokyo that had its name changed for being unlucky hundreds of years ago. For more details: https://japanthis.com/2014/04/07/what-does-kameari-mean/)
23. ↑ Reading some Japanese places and names in kanji can be difficult which is why he is confused here.
24. ↑ (Buddhist term) bodhisattva; one who has reached enlightenment but vows to save all beings before becoming a buddha
25. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanako-san
26. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aka_Manto
27. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teke_Teke
28. ↑ https://www.amazon.co.jp/%E5%88%9D%E6%9C%9F%E6%B1%9F%E6%88%B8%E8%AA%AD%E6%9C%AC%E6%80%AA%E8%AB%87%E9%9B%86-%E6%B1%9F%E6%88%B8%E6%80%AA%E7%95%B0%E7%B6%BA%E6%83%B3%E6%96%87%E8%8A%B8%E5%A4%A7%E7%B3%BB-%E9%AB%98%E7%94%B0-%E8%A1%9B/dp/4336042713
29. ↑ Word used here is https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denpa
30. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza
31. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norito
32. ↑ Buddhist sect, https://www.japanese-wiki-corpus.org/Buddhism/Shingi%20Shingon%20sect.html; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shingon_Buddhism
33. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana
34. ↑ A little difficult to explain and translate. The Agyou and sagyou part of 'Agyousan-sagyougo' refer to syllabary columns of the Japanese syllabary table. The two being used here are ‘agyou’ which is the "a" column of the Japanese syllabary table (a, i, u, e, o), and ‘sagyou’ is the “sa” column of the Japanese syllabary table (sa, shi, su, se, so). The ‘san’ at the end of 'Agyousan’ means the third syllable and ‘go’ at the end of sagyougo' means the fifth syllable. So it literally means the third syllable of agyou and the fifth syllable of sagyou. if you see what word comes up when you add the third and fifth syllables, you get ‘uso’, which means lie in Japanese. And exactly how Yoishi refers to it when she first calls it a lie. Pretty clever wordplay.
35. ↑ The word used here is Nenbutsu. https://en.wikipedia.org/

wiki/Nianfo
36. ↑ Unidentified mysterious animal
37. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Out-of-place_artifact
38. ↑ Word used here is nigero which is telling someone to run away and also a similar sounding word in this context.
39. ↑ Kamikakushi: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_away